

**November 29, 2020 Hope and Waiting Homily:** One of the great American tragedies of the American theater is *"The Iceman Cometh"*, a play written by Eugene O' Neil. Many drama critics and historians consider the play a masterpiece. The setting of the play is an Irish saloon in one of the neighborhoods of New York City, Greenwich Village. The year is 1912. The owner of the saloon is Harry Hope, a character who is surrounded by disillusioned patrons, all of whom drown out their sorrows and frustrations in alcohol. Harry, a man without hope, is the proprietor of what is surely one of the saddest drinking establishments in the city.

One character in particular is worthy of mention, Harry Slade. A sixty year old former anarchist, Slade, having grown disillusioned with the movement in which he participated for years, spends his entire day, morning, afternoon and night, at the bar. He has a grim, despairing view of life, and when asked three times why he chooses to spend all his time there, he replied, "I am simply waiting to die". He had reached a dead end.

A world without God is a world without hope.

Today marks the beginning of a new liturgical season, Advent. Advent means "coming". The season of advent is a time of waiting for someone who is to come. Christians are waiting for the coming of Christ. To quote John Henry Cardinal Newman: "Christians are waiting for the morning, waiting for the light, eagerly straining our eyes for the first dawn of day and looking out for the Lord's coming".

Advent is a season of joyful expectation and anticipation.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus, just before he goes to his death, addresses four of his disciples for the last time. The little parable he tells, the parable of the gatekeeper, talks about waiting. (Mk. 13:34) The man who stands at the door must wait patiently until his master comes home. He has been given no advance notice of when to expect the master's arrival. His waiting must be active, and not passive. He must continue to discharge his duties.

Christianity has a firm date that is known to us: December 25<sup>th</sup>, the birthdate of the Savior, yet the date and time of our Lord's second coming is uncertain... as is the hour of our own death! We must so live that it does not matter when He comes. We live in the shadow of eternity.

A story: Some years ago, in a letter written by Father Greg Mulhall, a retired priest of the Albany Diocese and a resident of Our Lady of Hope Nursing Home in Latham, to his close personal friend, Father Tom Vail, Father Mulhall requested that Fr. Vail agree to preach at his funeral mass. Father Vail, known for his wit and charm, replied in an amusing fashion. Although humbled by the request, given his busy schedule, Fr. Vail asked the retired priest for the date, time and place of the funeral mass! He needed to make note of the funeral in his appointment calendar!

Are we awake? Will we be ready to greet Christ?

In view of the virus now devastating our country and the world, too many people are anxious, depressed and fearful of what lies ahead. That's understandable. Hope is in short supply. But no one can live

without hope... no person, no nation and, above all, not the Church. As Christians we can be people of trust and witnesses to hope. And the foundation of our hope is Jesus Christ.

The late Vietnamese Cardinal, Nguyen Van Thuan, a prisoner for thirteen years, nine of them in solitary confinement, has left us a splendid little book: *"Prayers of Hope"*. During his incarceration, the fact that he could listen and speak to God became for him an increasing power of hope, which enabled him, after his release, to become for people all over the world a witness to hope, to hope that does not disappear in the most desperate moments of life.

For the playwright, Eugene O' Neil, hope is a "pipe dream", a fantasy not borne out by reality.

Not so for the Christian.

To quote the erstwhile Pope Benedict: "to come to know God... the true God... means to receive hope".

Amen!