

NOTES FROM FR. SEÁN

December 6, 2020

In Today's Gospel

This week we begin the second week of Advent. We are still in the season of preparation for Christmas. Before Jesus started his public ministry, his cousin, John the Baptist, went before him. John's coming was prophesied by Isaiah, who said, "A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!" (Is 40:3)

In today's gospel, we read from the beginning of the Gospel of Mark. Mark tells us of John the Baptist's coming as the one who cried out in the desert. John the Baptist came "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Mk 1:4) He calls us to repentance and preparation for Jesus Christ. This is what the season of Advent is about, a time of preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ.

Signs of the Times

As we enter Advent, we begin that time of preparation. We see this preparation in our church, in our homes, and the stores. Slowly but surely, the Christmas decorations are coming out; the radio stations are playing Christmas carols. These preparations are a sign that Christmas is coming. But a sign is something that represents, or points to, another reality. As we prepare for Christmas, these signs are signs of the preparation that takes place in our hearts as we prepare to welcome Christ into our hearts, not just at Christmas, but at all times.

Yes, this will be a different kind of Christmas. Some things may be a little bit more muted than in years past, but it is important that we still put up those external signs of Christmas. Last week, we saw the Advent wreath make its appearance in the church, with one candle burning. I put away my green vestments and pulled out the purple. Each week, the Advent wreath will glow a little brighter as we light another candle. As the wreath burns a little brighter, the light of Christ burns a little brighter in our hearts.

I know there may be a temptation this year to just forget about the Christmas decorations, to leave them in their boxes. I can understand that you may not want to go all out this year, but don't do nothing. Put up some of your decorations. This will be a sign to you and the world that something greater is coming.

Purple

As I mentioned above, I have put away my green vestments, pulled out the purple. The color of vestments means something. The color is a sign of what is happening in our liturgy. White represents joy. We wear white during the seasons of Christmas and Easter, along with the feast days for Jesus and Mary and many of the Saints. Green represents hope and growth. We wear this during Ordinary Time as a sign of our hope that we will continue to grow towards Christ. Red represents either the Holy Spirit or the blood of the martyrs. We wear red on the feast of Pentecost,

Palm Sunday and Good Friday, and on the memorials of the saints who have been martyred. Purple represents penance. We wear it for the sacraments of penance and anointing of the sick and during the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent.

In ancient times, the color purple had a very different meaning. Purple was one of the most difficult colors to produce, making it very expensive. Because of this, purple represented wealth and royalty. We see this at the crucifixion of Jesus when the guards put a purple cloak on Jesus to mock him as they cried out, "Hail, King of the Jews." (Jn 19:3)

I could not find a specific time when the symbolism of the color purple changed. One of the earliest references was in instruction from Pope Innocent III in the 12th century when he became the first pope to specify the colors to be used for the liturgy. Most likely, Pope Innocent III was not creating something new, but rather codifying existing customs. We do not know how long these customs were in place, only that now they became official.

I also could not find a specific reason for the change. Although I found various speculation, nothing was convincing. My speculation is that it has to do with the fact that Christ came to upset the balance in the world, "He has shown the strength of arm, he has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away." (Lk 2:51-53)

Christ, the King of the universe, took on our lowly nature. He set aside his divinity to become one like us. The color purple, which once represented royalty, now represents our poverty. It is through this poverty and our penance that we will be admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven.

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