November 28, 2021

First Sunday of Advent

We have certainly entered into the “Holiday” time of the year. Just a few days ago, we all celebrated the most treasured national holiday of Thanksgiving, and I pray that you were able to join with at least some of your family and dear friends as we all gave thanks for all our blessings, even in the midst of these troubled times. And the very next day the officially shopping frenzy for Christmas began with what is traditionally known as “Black Friday”, which turns into an entire weekend of special days to entice us on line or to venture out to actual stores to purchase the perfect gift for each person on our Christmas Gift list.

But as we gather together for Mass this Sunday, we are celebrating “New Year’s”, at least in our Liturgical/Spiritual lives. Today begins the new Church Year with the Season of Advent, to prepare our hearts spiritually for the celebration of the Coming of Christ on Christmas, but also to make sure that we are spiritually prepared for the Second Coming of Christ, either at the end of our lives, or at the end of the world, whichever comes first. We need to be prepared for “that day”, not in dread or out of fear, but to make sure that the concerns of this world and our involvements in all that each of our lives demands of us do not make us “miss” the Lord when He comes.

While our day to day lives do keep us focused on our daily schedules, there are some moments that stand out, even in the midst of our busy-ness. Any one of us can remember with vivid detail the year/month/day/and moment when someone very close to us passed on to their eternal reward. All we have to do is say the person’s name, and all the memories of “that day” come flooding back.

Or we all enjoy talking about the memories of the happy moments that stand out in our minds of special “days” in our past; for example to share with others the highlights of this past Thanksgiving Day. Or on another note, every child knows when we say the word “Christmas” exactly what “that day” is; and you can be sure that they are quite aware that “that joyful day” when Santa comes to town is only 27 days away and counting!

Those “days” of great significance, both happy and sad, stand out in our mind and heart; their full meaning is with us in an instant.
What we heard in today’s Readings hold that same significance.

Jeremiah talked about the “days that are coming” that the Lord promised to send the people of Israel who had been taken into captivity by the Babylonians, and were living in a strange land. “Those days” meant to every faithful Jewish person the day that would be greater than any other---it was the day when the Lord would “redeem” them---when they could be liberated from captivity and return to their homeland.

Jesus used the same phrasing in today’s Gospel: Don’t let “drowsiness” or other distractions catch you by surprise when “that day” comes. As Jesus continued: “that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth”.

The difference is that God’s Word is reminding us about a future moment that will be one of the most significant moments in our lives or in the history of the world---the “moment” when the Son of Man will return in Glory and the end of the world takes place. No one knows when “that day”---the day of Jesus’ Second Coming---will come. It might come tomorrow; it might not come for another 1,000 years. But we know that one day----“that day”----will come. Nor do we know when “that day” will come for each of us---when the end of our lives will take place. It might be tomorrow; it might not be for many years to come. But what we do know is “that day” will come.

The world has been around for so long that we have a tendency to assume that it will always be here. But our rational mind tells us that everything finite has a beginning and an end. We don’t know exactly how old the world is. Scientists have various theories on how long the world has existed, from several million years to several billion years. I asked the expert earlier today; I asked Alexa, and she said without even a second to ponder the question: “the Earth is 4 billion, 540 million years old”. So who can argue with Alexa, right?

The reality that the world will end, or that our lives will end, can cause some people to be frightened. But for us, as People of Faith, we should look toward “that day” with Hope, because that will be “the day” when Jesus fulfills His Promise as He spoke it to the Apostles: “I will come back and take you with Me, so that where I am, you also may be.”

Today is the first day of the Season of Advent. We have just transitioned from completing one Liturgical Year yesterday, and today we launch a new Liturgical Year. We also refer to it as a new “Year of Grace”, another year to open ourselves
to God’s Presence with us, and the graces that He offers us to help us live in His Love. We begin another Year when, we hope and pray, we will take more seriously what our basic vocation in life is----to grow in holiness, and to become more like Jesus in the way we live our lives.

Advent is the second shortest liturgical season of the Year, and this year, it’s as long as it can be, since Christmas is on a Saturday this year. While Advent is one of the shortest, it’s also one of the most important Liturgical seasons because it reminds us who we are, where we’re heading, and what is truly important.

That’s why Jesus’ strong advice is so important today: “Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life.” We can easily understand how drunkenness and carousing can make us “drowsy”, but how do anxieties cause “our hearts” to be drowsy? Jesus tells us that we must be “vigilant”. As Pope Francis said earlier today in Rome: “Vigilance means keeping our hearts on guard from becoming ‘sleepy Christians’ lacking spiritual dynamism and intensity in prayer.” We can allow our many anxieties, worries, fears, or concerns to distract us from the Hope that Jesus wants us to place in Him. That’s why Jesus so many times said to His Apostles, and to us: “Do not be afraid!”

Certainly there are concerns that we have, and worries that bother us in our daily lives, and perhaps at some points they can turn into personal traumas that greatly upset our lives. Jesus told us that there would be those kinds of moments in our natural world as well, as we heard Him say: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in disarray.”

We’re all aware that we’re living in some very troubling times, as the pandemic continues to maintain it’s hold on all the world, and now, evidently, there’s a new strain of the virus to concern us. There is political divisiveness like we’ve never seen before. There is social unrest and an ongoing challenge to traditional values. But Jesus tells us that even when we see those kinds of things happen, in our personal lives or in the world around us, we should “stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.”

Advent is much more than an “opening act” for Christmas; Advent reminds us at the beginning of every new Liturgical Year that we are mortal human beings, who will have an end to our mortal lives, but because we are baptized into Christ--because we are a follower of Jesus---because, I hope and pray, we are doing our
very best to live our daily lives according to Jesus’ teachings, and not according to
the ways of the world----as St. Paul told us in today’s Second Reading we are
trying to make our love for God and one another abound and increase----because
of all of that: Jesus promises us that we will share in His Victory on “that day”
when He comes again in Glory. We have nothing to fear. Jesus does give us one
condition to that Promise: “Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the
strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son
of Man.” In other words, don’t get “drowsy” or distracted; we must pay attention
to, and choose to live according to, what God shows us to be eternally important.

Advent is all about Hope. Hope doesn’t mean the same thing as “wish”, like
we might have on our Letter to Santa list or our Christmas “gift wishes”. No, Hope
is rooted in our Faith in Jesus, and because He came into the world on Christmas
to be our Savior, and because He willingly suffered, died and rose again on Easter
to gain for us our Salvation, and because we follow Jesus in our lives to the best of
our ability----we are people who have all those reasons to place our Hope in Jesus
and to be confident that He will be faithful to His Promise when He comes on
“that day”.

In that sense, Advent is more than a 4-week Liturgical Season----Advent is an
“attitude” that we live each day of our lives. In fact, using my own Episcopal
Motto, we are to live our lives with an attitude of “waiting in joyful Hope”. And
when we do so, we will continue looking forward to “that day” when Jesus comes
to us----on Christmas, every time we receive the Holy Eucharist, and ultimately at
the end of our lives/or the end of the world, whichever comes first for us, with
Advent Hope throughout all the days of our lives. Happy Advent!

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus, come!