

1st Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2017

One young clergyman preaching his first sermon, was very nervous. He started with the text, "Behold I come!" Then his mind went blank. He repeated, "Behold I come!" Still his frightened brain wouldn't function. So he leaned over the pulpit and repeated once more, "Behold I come!" At that moment the pulpit collapsed. He tumbled over into the people sitting in the first row. He got up and, red-faced, stammered, "Oh, I'm sorry! Please forgive me!" They were not upset in the least and one of them replied, "That's all right. We should have been expecting you. After all you warned us three times!"

Through the readings today God is reminding us to be alert, watchful and to be prepared because Christ's Second Coming, coinciding with the end of the world, can occur at any time.

The Church invites us on this first Sunday of Advent to prepare for Christ's Second Coming, first by properly celebrating during this Christmas season the fond memory of Christ's first coming 2000 years ago, second, by experiencing Christ's daily advent or coming in the Eucharistic celebrations, in the Holy Bible and in the worshipping community, and third, by preparing for Jesus' Second Coming which, for us, will happen at the moment of our deaths or at the end of the World.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah prays for God's active presence so that the Jewish community, returned from Babylonian exile, may remain faithful to their God

Around 600 BC, the Babylonians took the Jews out of the Promised Land and kept them in exile (the Babylonian Captivity) for about 60 years. When Cyrus, the Persian emperor, took over Babylon, he sent the Jews home. This reading is set in that troubled period when Judah was trying to put itself back together after returning from Exile. Isaiah expressed the hope of Israel for a powerful manifestation of God in their midst. "Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before You." The prophet hoped that if God would come into their midst, the people could be faithful to Him. Acknowledging the fact that the people were unfaithful, Isaiah asked for God's forgiveness and acceptance:

"You, O Lord, are our Father; we are the clay and You are the potter: we are all the work of Your hands." He begged Yahweh, the Father of the Chosen People, for mercy. This prayer was answered when the Son of God became man in the Incarnation.

Through the Gospel today St. Mark reminds us of Jesus' words, "Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake! You do not know when the appointed time will come." The evangelist knew that if an expected event didn't happen as quickly as expected, people would stop doing the things they ought to do. Hence, Mark reminded them of Jesus' parable about the gate-keeper in the house of a traveling master. Since the master was traveling, his servant must be constantly alert, "at dusk, at midnight, when the cock crows, or at early dawn." There was always a fear that the master would come home "suddenly and catch you asleep." In such situations one must constantly, "be on guard!"

In the same way, there is no reason for Christ's followers to be fearful, provided we are ready every day for Jesus' return. If we are awake and ready, the coming of the Son of Man is an event to be greeted with joy. Thus, our whole life should be a preparation to meet the master. We base this constant watch not on fear but on hope in God's promise of eternal life.

Like the parents who trust their teenagers to look after the house while they are away, or like the teacher who leaves the classroom after giving her students plenty of work to do, Jesus trusts us to carry out his work until he returns. There is the work of witnessing to Jesus in our daily lives. There is the work to be done in our families, our schools, our local churches and our community. There is the work of caring for those who are hurting and have needs.

When Jesus came into the World the first time 2000 years ago he was born in a cattle shed with a manger for his bed. If we want to celebrate this Christmas meaningfully let us welcome Jesus to be born in our hearts. To make our hearts his manger let us prepare our hearts during this advent through prayer, through making sacrifices and through helping others in the best way possible.

Next Sunday on December 10, we have the opportunity to participate in the penance rite in our parish at 5:30 pm. Let us make use of this opportunity to prepare ourselves to celebrate the birth of the Lord in a fitting manner.