

2020 - FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, NOVEMBER 29, 2020

"Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come" (Mark 13:33).

Last Sunday, the solemnity of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Gospel (Matthew 25:31-46) reminded us that our Shepherd King will come in the company of his angels to judge all peoples and nations.

This Sunday, the readings brim with the coming of the Lord. This is what Advent is all about. Today is the first Sunday of Advent! We know that the Lord has already come, he was born and he suffered, died and rose from the dead. That is why we have Christmas, Good Friday and Easter. The season of Advent wants us to never forget that God came, he is with us and he will come again. As a season centered on the Lord's coming, Advent reveals something deep about our religion. Through Advent, the supernatural and historical dimensions of Christianity are put in sharp relief. Our religion comes from God at a precise historical time. Though eternal, the Word of God became flesh and let himself be born in time. He became like us in all things but sin. He lived, He spoke and He worked like a man in the world. He was hungry, thirsty, tired, tempted, suffered and persecuted.

Why did God take on such an extreme self-emptying measure? Because he loves us. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in

him might not perish but might have eternal life" (John 3:16). The paradox is that not all men received the Lord with the same love which he had for us. Some rejected him, brought false charges against him and finally crucified him. The Bible says, "He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him. But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:11-12).

As we begin the Advent season this year, the readings invite us to be ready for his coming. Being the fulfilment of the longings in the first reading, the Lord commanded, "Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come" (Mark 13:33). We do not know when the Lord will come but his coming is certain. Why? Because he came before and he does not make false promises.

Arising from the background of exile and captivity, the first reading from Isaiah (63: 16-17,19 and 64:2-7) expresses intense longing for the coming of the Lord. "Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage" (Isaiah 63:17). Further, "Oh, that you would rend heaven and come down" (Isaiah 63:19). These longings for the coming of the Lord were fulfilled in the birth of the Savior. This in turn directs our gaze to his second coming. St Bernard spoke about the coming of the Lord in a threefold way. "His first coming was in the flesh and weakness, the intermediary coming is in the spirit and in power, the last coming will be in glory and majesty" (St Bernard, *The Word of God will come within us, Sermon 5 on Advent*, 1-3, Office of the

Readings, Liturgy of the Hours, Wednesday of Advent, Week 1).

We do not know when the Lord will come. The important thing is to be ready at all times. How can we be ready? We shall take our clue from the faithful servant who stayed at his duty doing what he is supposed to do. Borrowing from Scripture, St Bernard gave counsel on how to be ready for the coming of the Lord. Keep the Word of God in your heart, he advised. "Let it pierce deep into your inmost soul and penetrate your feelings and actions" (Ibid.,).

In our present situation of coronavirus pandemic and the endemic political uncertainty, how so important is it for us to be alert and watchful. Watchful and alert means that we cannot let ourselves fall into spiritual drowsiness, lethargy and forgetfulness. Much goes wrong when believers are not watchful. "Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap (Luke 23:34-35).

To inherit eternal blessedness and avoid these pitfalls, God gave us a Mediator, his only Son. As St Augustine pointed out, "It was not enough for God to give us his Son merely to point the way. He made the Son himself the way, so that you might journey with him as your guide, as he walks in his own way" (St Augustine, *God's Promises are given to us through the Son, Discourses on the Psalms 109, 1-3* in the Office of Readings, Wednesday of Advent, Week 2). In the same vein, St John of the Cross wrote, When God gave us

his Son, who is his one Word. He spoke everything to us once and for all in the One Word. There is nothing further for him to say" (St John of the Cross, God has spoken to us in Christ, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book 2, Chapter 22, Office of the Readings, Liturgy of the Hours, Monday of Advent week 2).

Letting the Word of God pierce our innermost souls and penetrate our feelings and actions is expressed in living out God's commandments. Keeping the commandments makes us unafraid. It allows us to take the road less traveled when we know that it is the right road. The commandments allow us heed the ancient injunction. "Stand by the earliest roads, ask the pathways of old, "Which is the way to good?" and walk it; thus, you will find rest for yourselves" (Jeremiah 6:16). This is contrary to the ways of the secular minded people like Niccolò Machiavelli, who, when he was dying, said that he did not want to go to heaven. He thought that he would see only the poor, the have-nots, and the Apostles and not the princes and popes.

Together with Isaiah our plea to God is, "Would that you might meet us doing right, that we might be mindful of you in our ways!" (Isaiah 64:4). This prayer comes true when we are alert and watchful. As you take this option, my prayer for you is, "May the God of peace make you perfect in holiness. May he preserve you whole and entire, spirit, soul, and body, irreproachable at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls us is trustworthy, therefore he will do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).