

## Sermon Advent 1 Year C 2018

Perhaps one of the most haunting things to be heard from the backseat of the car during a family road trip is: *are we there yet?...* The tone of anxious impatience signalling to parents the world over: it's going to be long journey... Here we are, just commencing our journey through Advent, but in many ways it seems the world around us has already come to Christmas. Carols have been playing for weeks. Decorations have been in some homes and shops for quite a while. Already, even in November, some organisations were having Christmas break-ups, because, well 'December just gets too busy...' In our rush to get to Christmas many take the express route! But the church has a different mind on this. Today we celebrate the first Sunday of Advent. Not a Christmas carol to be heard. The church is looking somewhat bare and the decorations pared back and not looking at all festive. The only seasonal decoration is this modest wreath... And the readings put before us today have us hard pushed to find *any* connection to what we intend to celebrate in a few weeks time.

Because the church doesn't want to rush toward Christmas without first talking in the significance of the journey there. And the readings placed before us today of course *are entirely* related to the Christmas story. For sure there's no Mary and Joseph. There's no stable or shepherds or angels. All that will come much later in our journey. But what we have in the readings today is, if you like, the complete overview. We are given today a glimpse of *the big picture*, so that as we begin our journey, we see what our ultimate destination is. We see in the readings today the *wider* context that gives the *whole* Jesus story, the whole Jesus event, meaning. Without that big picture, without that wider context the life of Jesus, including his birth, makes no sense.

As so often the scriptures point us in two directions, to give us the wider context, that bigger picture. The two directions give us that sense of perspective we need if we are to truly apprehend all that is going on in Jesus Christ. The first direction takes us to the Old Testament and to the idea of promise fulfilled. This *whole* season of Advent is charged with a mood of waiting and anticipation and expectation.

The Old Testament is full accounts of waiting for God; a yearning for God to act definitively in human history; a desire for God to reveal Godself, a longing for God to restore the dignity and hope of his people. All that must be read into the Jesus event: this long history of hope and promise; his birth understood as the culmination of centuries of waiting and longing and expectation.

But what we celebrate in this season is the *two-fold* coming of Christ: his first in Bethlehem as a babe in the manger. But also his second coming in glory at the end of the time. *Advent* simply means 'appearing' or 'arrival'. So, we only see half the picture if we imagine that this 'appearing' refers only to a certain birth 2000 years ago. The gospel reading placed before us today confronts us directly with the second direction which gives this season its full meaning: the coming again of Christ in glory. Of course, for most of us this seems so disconnected to the usual images we associate with this time of year: *'The nations in agony...men dying of fear... the powers of heaven will be shaken...'* This is about as far removed from the babe of Bethlehem, from Christmas trees and nativity scenes that you could imagine!

Now, these images of complete and radical upheaval might well leave us shaking in our boots just a little bit. Might well unsettle and unnerve us. But that might be put into perspective if we remember they are just as filled with hope and promise as Christ's first coming was the fulfillment of so much hope and promise. Because as people of faith we believe that Christ's judgement will be merciful, that he is the just judge, the loving judge. We look to his coming again in hope.

Yes, we look to him in hope. But we do so with watchfulness and attentiveness. Without being confident in our ultimate hope, without being certain of our ultimate destiny it is all too easy to slip into casual indifference, into the moral apathy Christ warns against. Christ exhorts us today to watchfulness, to vigilance. But that is impossible if we are not sure of what we are looking for or moving towards. It makes no sense to be watchful or vigilant if we imagine our lives and our conduct has no eternal consequence.

If we take our eyes off either direction - that Christ has arisen out of hope and promise; that he will come again in glory - then we will end up with a very compromised, diminished picture of who Jesus is, and what his life and work is all about. The ridiculous claims that so many people make about 'what Christmas is all about' and the silliness associated with so much of the season simply reflects this. Take away the ultimate meaning of the season we substitute it with a whole lot of nonsense. This big picture stuff is so important if we are to get past the sentimental, tame, insipid picture that so often passes as Jesus. If we are going to take Jesus seriously then we are going to take in the whole picture, and its implications. And that just highlights the vigilance Jesus warns us about today. Take your eyes off him and you end up in a completely different direction!

In a few moments time we lead little Spencer to the font. And as we baptise him, he is incorporated into the bigger picture in which all our lives unfold. However cute and innocent he looks today, his life has eternal consequence! But by being washed in life-giving waters of baptism, his story becomes part of the biggest story ever told! The task of his parents and of those who love him will be to hold out to him that bigger story, to remind him that his ultimate happiness and destiny does not lay in what is achieved here in this life, whatever hopes and aspirations they may have for him. Little Spencer's life will only be fulfilled in reference to Christ, who welcomes him into his church today.

My brothers and sisters, we rob ourselves if we allow these coming weeks to swamp us by the trite, trivial and distracting. We too need to place ourselves into the Big Picture. Now, we don't need to bemoan or get grumpy at the way this season has evolved. And we can't expect people - and a culture - who are not Christian to behave as if they were! But this holy season of Advent is a grace *to us* - a gift from God to us! At this time, Holy Mother Church helps us celebrate Christ's two advents. And this a gift, so that we see the full significance of the person and work of Christ. This season a gift to us so we see ourselves in that bigger picture. Amen.