

Homily for Advent 1 Year C (Jer 33.14_16; Ps 25:1_10; 1 Th 3.9_13; Luke 21.25_36)

Last week, we heard and read about the Reign of Christ, or as some call it, the Feast of Christ the King. It is significant in my mind that the Reign of Christ falls when it does at the end of Pentecost and before Advent. This means that this feast falls at the end of time. That Sunday used to be known as the Sunday next before Advent or "stir it up" Sunday, named for the first few words of the Collect appointed for that Sunday in the *Book of Common Prayer*, "Stir up, we beseech you, O Lord, the wills of your faithful people." It was the time when we all gave the Christmas pudding a stir.

But now, the feast of the Reign of Christ, comes at this very appropriate time. The cycle of the Christian year we are caught up in the events leading up to the birth, life, baptism, temptations in the wilderness, ministry, trial and passion, death, resurrection, ascension to glory, the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and finally the reign of Christ enthroned in glory at the end of time. And then the whole cycle begins again.

On this first Sunday in Advent, we stand, as it were, on the very threshold of time, at the fulcrum point. We are at the beginning of a new year in the Christian year while still in the secular reckoning of time, in the old year. We are both looking ahead like we did last week to the coming of Christ the King or the Reign of Christ at the end of time, while we also look back to the first time when Christ Jesus came into the world. We look at all the hopes and dreams surrounding each of those events in time. We are a people of hope.

The passage from Jeremiah nicely encompasses both the looking forward to, and the looking back from, to which we are attuned today in this 1st Sunday of Advent. The hope for things to come, a hope based on past experiences.

When the prophet declared to the people "that the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah," Jeremiah was giving the people cause to hope that a righteous branch would spring up from the house of David. The house of David and the reign of David as king, was seen as a golden time in the life of Israel and Judah, and indeed, the people idealized it. In their collective memory they could remember the house of David and they could look forward to the coming of the righteous branch, for a time when righteousness and justice would prevail and they themselves would be called "The Lord is our righteousness."

This promise to Israel and Judah lived on in their hearts and kept them hoping, expecting, dreaming of the time when the Lord would fulfill it. It was the hope that Simeon had, to see the Messiah before he died. It was what John the Baptist looked for when he began his ministry in the River Jordan, exhorting people to "prepare the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight."

This same hope has been taken on by Christians who found in the birth and life of Jesus, the fulfilment of the promise of God, that a branch of the house of David was raised up. We too, carry within our hearts, the promise of the second coming of Christ at the end of time. We celebrate Christ the same yesterday, today and forever.

All the readings today are linked by their references to the coming of the Lord. The Jeremiah reading spoke of the days "that are surely coming" when the Lord will fulfill the promise of hope. This allowed the Jews to live their lives in expectation, even as they lived through wars, exile, and the desecration of their holy places. They had a hope for future redemption which allowed them to live life to the full in the present.

In the reading from the Epistle, the reference to the recurring theme of the coming of the Lord is from the passage, "the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints," which for us is also a promise of hope. We have been redeemed by Christ, but we also look forward to the

redemption at the end of time. In this letter to the Thessalonians, Paul prays that "the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, and strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before God at the coming of Jesus with his saints."

We are to be living holy lives here and now. In the words of the collect for today we pray, "Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life." Here and now. The collect goes on to say "that on the last day, when Christ shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to life immortal." We live in the present and we live in hope.

The gospel reading is linked to the others by its reference to the coming of the Lord when Luke writes of the signs which will abound. In the sequence of readings for each of the Sundays of Advent, Year C, it is the first Sunday with the readings that seem to be dark and drear but with the hint of what will happen in the end times. The readings for the following Sundays of Advent have a note of glory by contrast. Luke wrote that when these signs appear people will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud." Then he wrote, "when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Our redemption is drawing near, it is not yet realized. Luke wrote this gospel for a Church which was beginning to discern that the end had not yet happened, even while some of the earliest disciples and converts had died. There was a need to remind the believers about hope in the redemption to come. Luke wrote this gospel to enable them to go on living in the here and now, while having a deep abiding hope and expectation of their redemption near yet unrealized.

I don't believe that Luke gave a strict timetable of events that we could point to and say, "Aha, this and this and this has happened, so therefore, it is the time appointed." Then as now, we live in troubled times, but we have a reason for the hope that is within us through our faith in Christ Jesus.

In the gospel of Mark which Luke may have used as a source or a reference when writing his gospel, Jesus says to the disciples, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

In the gospel we heard this morning, Luke uses the parable of the fig tree to try and explain that somehow, just as we comprehend that summer is near when the trees begin to leaf out, we will know when our Redemption is drawing nigh and we are to stand up! But we have to be awake to notice!

I like the image used to stand up and raise our heads. Before I came to the Sisterhood of Saint John the Divine, I had an education in forestry and worked for a time out in the bush. I met my share of black bears. If you are attacked by a black bear, your best defence is simply to lie down and play dead and try to cover your face. We are being told here to stand up, be ready, be at attention. Raise your heads and be ready to listen to what you may be called to do to help bring about the reign of God. We are to be on guard and alert at all times, praying that we will have the strength to escape all these things that will take place and to be able to stand before the throne of God when Jesus, our redemption comes.

It is a way of living which is challenging, to always be on the alert and awake. We are exhorted to not let our hearts be weighed down by dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life. This is a way of living in which we must sit lightly to the things of this world and pay attention more to the issues which matter to help bring about the reign of Christ on earth. To abound in love for each other and for all, and to strengthen our hearts in holiness.

Advent is a good time to begin to live into our hope and expectation of the coming of the Lord. We prepare in our hearts a home for the Lord. Advent is the pause before the birth of the infant Jesus, the birth in time of the Son of God who came to redeem us and who will come again as our redemption. Advent traditionally is a time for prayer and fasting in preparation for the great feast of Christmas, so that we may be empty of ourselves to receive the Lord into our hearts. You might consider fasting from too many activities this Advent as you prepare your hearts and homes for Christmas. We need a quiet space in our hearts so that we may receive the Lord within. Come, let us stand and raise our heads, for our redemption is drawing near.

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