

1st Sunday of Advent-C

Today, the First Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of a new year in the Church's liturgical calendar. But if I were to say to you "Happy New Year" this morning, it would sound strangely out of sync. Just when the Church signals a time of beginning, the rest of the world is focused on endings.

Every day newspapers and now even billboards announce the number of shopping days until Christmas. Tax attorneys remind their clients of the need to make yearend charitable contributions---and college football ends its regular season this weekend in preparation for the bowl games. But for the Church, the year is just beginning--- and Advent invites us to reset our spiritual calendar, to readjust the choices in our lives to be sure that they are consistent with the priorities of Christ.

The Scriptural readings for these first two Sundays of Advent focus not on the coming of the infant at Bethlehem, but on Christ's final coming in judgment at the end of time. Paul, in the second reading, urges the people of Thessalonica in Greece to make greater efforts to live in harmony with the Gospel so as to be blameless and holy at the coming of the Lord Jesus.

This letter to the Thessalonians is the earliest Christian writing that we have, composed probably in the year 51 or 52 A.D. Paul, and every Christian at the time, thought that the second coming of Jesus was imminent---the next month, or the next year, surely during their lifetime--- so there was an urgency to Paul's plea.

There are people in our times who feel that they have a fix on when the world is going to end. Many may remember all the buzz about the Mayan calendar that came to on December 21, 2011 foreshadowing the end of the world.

Or some years earlier we can recall the hapless individuals who belonged to the Heaven's Gate group who committed mass suicide in anticipation of an apocalyptic end with the arrival of the mothership.

Of course, let's not forget the Y2K scare at the end of 1999, once again foreshadowing disaster and the end of life as we know it.

We all smile at these doomsday forecasts and may consider them a fringe phenomenon. We really don't know when the world is going to end, and Jesus told us in last week's Gospel that even He didn't know. We don't know how much time we each have left, but for sure we have one day less than we had yesterday. The world may not end during our lifetime, but our personal history certainly will when we come face to face with Jesus.

The most comforting thing that the Scriptures whisper to us this morning is that the coming of Jesus is not a day to dread but a day to celebrate. In the readings today Jeremiah speaks with a voice of reassurance, of a day when God comes to fulfill His promises and to provide security for those who wait for Him faithfully. Paul, in the second reading, foretells a day when God will invite us into a joy-filled life with the saints. And in Luke's Gospel passage, Jesus tells us to approach the Day of the Lord by standing tall, lifting our faces toward God because our redemption is at hand.

And that is the core message of Advent. We wait for God not with a sense of dread but with lively hope---like expectant parents as they wait to hear their baby's first cry, like wedding guests waiting to glimpse the bride as she comes down the aisle. We wait not for the end of everything but for the beginning of a new day, more beautiful than we could ever have imagined it.

Advent is a season to prepare. When we are called to meet the Lord, we don't want to be unfamiliar to Him---or He to us. Much better if we can walk into the presence of a longtime friend. Advent calls us to reflect on that friendship and to foster it— to spend even just a few minutes a day in conversation with Jesus privately and with our families. Take advantage of the opportunity to go to confession and make right your relationship with Our Lord. And give thanks to God with all your heart for the gift of Salvation and the abundant graces He offers to grow in holiness that we might greet Our Lord with joyful hearts when He comes again to take us home.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella