

November 27, 2016. First Sunday of Advent

Well, there's no doubt about it---- the holiday season is definitely here. It began on Thursday with Thanksgiving Day. I hope everyone here had a wonderful time with family and friends, as I did with mine, giving all of us a chance to count our many blessings. And it looks like everyone survived "Black Friday", "Small Business Saturday", even as we get ready for "Cyber Monday" tomorrow. Most businesses and many homes already have their Christmas decorations up, the Christmas lights are lit, and the Christmas songs are reminding us that we better watch out and not cry because Santa Claus is coming to town in less than a month.

We just heard similar advice from Jesus in today's Gospel passage: "Stay awake! Watch out! Be prepared!" But it didn't have anything to do with Santa Claus coming. Jesus was calling us to be ready to welcome the Son of Man when He returns at the end of all time. Sometimes, we hear those words as reasons to be afraid or anxious. But Jesus actually intends us to hear them as a wonderful promise, and calls us to keep living our lives looking forward in Hope to all the ways Jesus remains with us here and now, and in the life of the world to come.

Today is the First Sunday of Advent, and the beginning of a new Church Year. Advent is all about anticipation----looking forward with hope----making sure that we are prepared for all the blessings and graces God wants to bring to us in this new Year of Grace that we're just beginning. Actually we heard that same advice in all the Readings for this First Sunday of Advent. In today's First Reading, the Prophet Isaiah shared a "vision" of what the future would hold: that the *"mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest mountain"*, and *"that all nations shall stream toward it"*; and best of all Isaiah told us that one day people would *"beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; when one nation shall not raise the sword against another"*; that one day, there would be no such thing as war! Now that's a dream and a vision to long for! St. Paul told us in today's Second Reading to be aware that *"it is the hour **now** to awake from sleep because our salvation is nearer than when we first believed"*. And of course, in the Gospel Jesus also urged us to *"stay awake"* because the day of our Lord is near.

While it can be comforting at times to pause and look back over our lives and think about the memories of the past---both good and bad---we can't live in the past; we live in the here and now, but always with our eye on the future. Every day when we wake up, we have some sort of "plan"; when are we going to Mass, what time shall we eat dinner, are we going to watch a football game or shall we go shopping or put up our Christmas decorations? We live each day

with an eye on where we're going and how we're going to get there, today, tomorrow and the next day.

Advent asks us to make sure that we keep in mind the "bigger picture"----what's the plan for our ultimate future? That's why we need to make sure that we hear Jesus' advice to "stay awake", "watch out" and "be prepared". Advent really focuses on the virtue of hope and reminds us to move forward with confidence, even though the future is full of unknowns. We don't just try to be good because Santa is coming; we try to be good because our God came to be with us, which is why we celebrate Christmas; and we can live our lives with joy because Jesus stays with us, and remains with us no matter what circumstances we face in the future, good or bad.

Just last week on the Feast of Christ the King, as the Jubilee Year of Mercy came to an end, Pope Francis issued a beautiful Apostolic Exhortation ("Mercy and Misery") reminding us that just as God's love for each of us is unconditional, God's mercy for us is never ending. As Pope Francis wrote: "Now at the conclusion of this Jubilee, it is time to look to the future and to understand how best to continue, with joy, fidelity and enthusiasm, experiencing the richness of God's mercy." The very reason we knock ourselves out in these next few weeks trying to get all our Christmas greetings, shopping, and decorating done is to celebrate the central mysteries of our faith: 1) our God has come to be with us because He loves us; 2) He suffered, died and rose from the dead to save us; 3) and He remains with us always through the Church and in the Sacraments because He knows that we are human, imperfect and sinful human beings who need God's love and mercy. Of course we're going to sin and make mistakes. That's exactly why Jesus came to be with us. He loved being with sinners who were aware of their sins, and who were humble enough to ask for mercy. Among all the other things that are on our Christmas "to-do" list we should make sure to include time to make a good Christmas confession, and to turn to the Lord each day to ask for His love and mercy.

In the midst of these next 27 shopping days until Christmas, let's listen to Jesus' words to "stay awake", "watch out" and "be prepared" to meet the Lord when He comes. Because He not only will come to us at the end of all time, but He wants to come to us in all the circumstances of our lives, both the good and the bad. Advent begins a new year of grace----new opportunities to grow in the ways we love those with whom we share life as we are humble enough to ask one another for mercy and forgiveness; new opportunities for our country as we go through some major changes in leadership; and new opportunities for each of us to make sure that we stay awake and are prepared for all the graces and blessings God wants to bring into our lives.

Isaiah's wonderful dream does not need to be "an impossible dream"; it is a dream that begins to be realized when each one of us beats the swords of our hard-heartedness and the spears of our sins of violence and anger into the plowshares and pruning hooks of the Peace and Joy we see in Jesus. It is then that we can live in Advent Peace; it is then that violence and war lose their effectiveness. As St. Paul reminded us: "Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed", which is just another way of saying "it's later than you think"---so let's stay awake so that we don't miss all the joy--the hope---the love and mercy that God has in store for each of us.

God bless you, now and always!