

Homily for the First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:37-44

Around town, in the stores, in people's homes
and even here in church with some greens and the Advent wreath,
it's beginning to look a lot like...

How many of you have already put up some Christmas stockings?
Has anyone put a tree up yet?
Who's been shopping for gifts?
Who's already got some gifts wrapped?
Isn't it amazing how people decorate everything?
from mailboxes to doghouses?
And of course, a wreath for the front door.

*(By this point in my homily I had a stocking, a small tree,
wrapped gifts and metallic garland around and on me,
and a wreath atop my head!)*

Do I look foolish?
Of course I do!
And I *want* to look foolish here:
as foolish as any Christian who might for even a moment think
that all of these trappings have anything significant to do
with what Advent and Christmas are all about.

What would happen if we took away
all the decorations, the presents, the trees and wreaths,
the ornaments, ribbons and bows,
and all the spending and partying?
If we took all that away,
what would be left of Christmas?

There's nothing intrinsically wrong
with all the trappings and wrappings of Christmas
unless these things overwhelm and even begin to substitute for
the real meaning of Christmas,
and the business of Advent raised by the Word we just heard.
These scriptures pose some hard questions for us.

Are we beating our swords into ploughshares?
making farm tools of our armaments?
training for war no more?

- as Isaiah dreamed and taught us?
Such movement towards peace – that’s the business of Advent.

Are we following St. Paul’s advice to “throw off the works of darkness?”
- the words and deeds, the relationships (social and business)
that we’re not so proud of? embarrassed by? ashamed of?
Are we putting on the “armor of light,”
living and working and playing honestly, justly and charitably?
That’s the business of Advent.

When it comes to our spiritual life,
are we awake, as St. Paul calls us to be?
Or are we dozing, napping, asleep at the switch?
What will wake us, shake us, rouse us from complacency?

Do we live in rivalry, jealousy and envy?
Or are we working towards acceptance of who we are and what we have?
That’s the business of Advent.

Do we invest our time and energy and resources
in providing for the desires of the flesh, creature comforts,
or do we invest in nourishing the desires of the heart?

Much more than a “birthday party for Jesus”
Advent is meant to be a season
to help us wake up and shape up to be ready
- not for giving and getting presents -
but to rouse us to be ready to meet Christ
who has come, who is with us, and who will come again –
and to ready a peaceful world for the time of his return,
whenever that might be.

Unfortunately, our horizon on all of this
is often limited by the date of December 25.
Look at it this way:
the Giving Tree and the Prison Outreach Gift Project
aren’t just to keep some people from feeling left out
on Christmas morning.

The truth for Christians is that we should have giving trees all year round
because sharing and providing for all, especially those in need,
is a sign of the advent of the reign of God among us.
Advent calls us to be the people
whose lives bear witness to God’s reign already with us
and yet to come.

The table we call Christ's altar
is the place where he who came among us some 2,000 years ago,
comes again, returns to be with us,
every time we celebrate the Eucharist,
nourishing and providing for the needs of our hearts
by providing as our food the body and blood of his life.

In a way, this table and the Eucharist we celebrate here
are a stable, a Bethlehem, a place where God's Word-made-flesh
visits his people and makes his home in their hearts.

May the season of Advent ready us for his coming
and strengthen us to ready the world for his return.