

1ST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, B
ADVENT: A SEASON OF GRACE

“Be on your guard, stay awake, because you never know when the time will come” (Mk. 13: 33)

The Season of Advent begins today. It is the beginning of a new liturgical year. But most importantly, it is a special season when we recall in history, the Birth of the Infant Christ, The Saviour of the world; and anticipate the Second Coming of that Infant of Nazareth as King and Judge of the living and the dead. The word “Advent” taken from the Latin word “Adventus” meaning “Coming” already provides for this understanding. These words of the Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI capture the symbolism of Advent for us Christians: the spirit, the joy and the hope it brings.

In Advent, Christians relive a dual impulse of the spirit: on the one hand, they raise their eyes towards the final destination of their pilgrimage through history, which is the glorious return of the Lord Jesus; on the other, remembering with emotion his birth in Bethlehem, they kneel before the Crib. The hope of Christians is turned to the future but remains firmly rooted in an event of the past. In the fullness of time, the Son of God was born of the Virgin Mary: “Born of a woman under the law” (Gal. 4: 4) We might say that Advent is the season in which Christians must rekindle in their hearts the hope that they will be able with God’s help to renew the world.

The dual perspective of Advent is more aptly expressed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) in these words: “When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent, each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Saviour’s first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for His second coming” (#524). Indeed, our faith revolves around a mystical and salvific event that links, in one unbroken cord, the coming of Jesus in the past, the influence of Jesus on our lives in the present, and the hope of His coming in the future. In Advent, the Church invites us to a life of prayer, repentance and abstinence. Very much like the Season of Lent, as reflected in the purple chasuble of the priest and the omission of the Gloria at Mass. The reduced decorations of the sanctuary and the Advent Candles add to this similarity. These candles: Prophecy Candle, Bethlehem, Shepherd’s, Angels and Christ Candles symbolise hope, love, joy, peace and the life of Christ that has come into the world respectively.

The season of Advent is a season of preparation and expectancy in anticipation of the joyful celebration of Christmas. On this First Sunday of Advent, the theme of preparation is echoed in the words of Our Lord in the Gospel (Mark 13: 33-37). With

a short parable of the absentee master, Jesus highlights the need to "Be on your guard" and to "Stay awake." The four-time repetition of the exhortation: "Stay awake" emphasises the urgency and the importance of the message at this time.

What does Jesus mean by telling us to "Stay awake"? Certainly, Jesus is not saying that we should sleep no longer. He is not referring to physical sleep or bodily rest. He is rather referring to something deeply spiritual. When the Scriptures speak of sleep it borrows the idea from the physical nature of sleep, when a man is weak, defenceless and vulnerable. Therefore, "sleep" is linked to darkness, which is the domain of temptation, weakness and the evil one. We are hereby cautioned not to be spiritually weak as in when we are asleep. A state of spiritual slumber would make us susceptible to being caught unaware and falling into temptation and sin. In the First Reading (Is. 63: 17-17; 64: 1, 3-8), the prophet Isaiah pleads for the children of Israel were typically asleep after their return from exile in Babylon. They abandoned the Lord God, their Redeemer, allowing themselves to be pawns and preys in the hands of the evil one. How easy and quickly we slip when everything around us seems to be alright. No wonder St. Paul cautioned: "Let him who thinks that he stands firm beware lest he might fall (1 Cor. 10: 12).

Therefore, the Gospel challenges us to stay awake, be alert and be vigilant so that we are swept off by the looming temptations. St Paul captures this idea very succinctly thus: "But it is not as if you live in the dark, my brothers, for that day to overtake you like a thief. No, you are all sons of light and sons of the day: we do not belong to the night or to darkness, so we should not go on sleeping, as everyone else does, stay wide awake and sober. The night is the time for sleepers to sleep and drunkards to be drunk, but we belong to the day and we should be sober; let us put on faith and love as our breastplate and the hope of salvation for a helmet" (1 Thess. 5: 4-8). This is the whole idea of and reason for staying awake – to be always ready for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed at Christmas, and for His Second Coming.

Therefore, my dear friends, let us eschew from all works of darkness and stay awake in good works of love so that coming of Christ at Christmas, and at the Parousia may not find us "asleep." May this be a season of grace for all of us.