

## First Sunday of Advent

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 4, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

As we look about us this morning, we notice, of course, the differences in the decorations that we have in church this morning, because we are beginning a new year in the church. We're beginning this season of Advent, the time of special preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. So we have different colors, purple vestments, the blue and white that show joy, the advent candle, and readings that remind us of the coming of God into our midst.

But because we are celebrating this season of Advent, or beginning it and preparing for Christmas, we might tend to listen to the readings in a way that only calls our attention to what is going to happen on Christmas Day, and in fact, I'm sure that those who planned this liturgy and planned these readings wanted us at least to hear some of them this way. Like the first reading, where the prophet cries out, "Oh, God, that you would rend the heavens and come down. The mountains would quake at your presence." We can think of Christmas, when God would rend the heavens and come down and be in our midst in Jesus, one like us in every way.

Or we listen to Paul speaking to the church at Corinth and telling them, "Be ready, be ready. God has gifted you. Be ready for the full revelation of Jesus," and we think, again, of Christmas, when Jesus, the son of God, comes into our midst.

Or the gospel lesson where Jesus again urges us, "Be alert, be ready." He tells that parable about the householder who is going on a journey and wants his servants to take care of everything while he's gone to be ready for him to return, and of course that was a time when there weren't e-mails or telephones or any kind of communication so you never knew when a person was coming back. Travel was so uncertain so it really was important, if you were part of that household, to be alert-midnight, dawn, in between, any time, the master might come. So we think again, be ready for Christmas, the coming of Jesus.

That's certainly a good way to listen to these lessons, to think of them as helping us to prepare for a very special and fervent celebration of the feast of Christmas. But maybe we ought to try to listen to these lessons as the people heard them when they were first proclaimed, because Isaiah wasn't talking about some long distance in the future, where the people would have the son of God in their midst in human form. Isaiah wasn't preaching about that. The prophets didn't predict; they were teaching for the moment, or what was happening at that moment.

And at that moment these people had come back from exile and as Isaiah points out, they were in many ways, far from God. He says about them, "Why are you straying from God's ways? Why have you let your heart become hard so that you do not fear God? Why have irreligious people invaded your sanctuary? For too long

you have become like those who do not bear your name." See, Isaiah is dealing with a situation where the people have come back, they're discouraged, they're disheartened, everything has gone wrong, and they've given up on God.

So Isaiah is pleading at that moment to God, "Rend the heavens, come down, let the mountains quake at your presence." Isaiah wants the people to realize God's presence at that very moment, that God would come into their midst, give them hope, inspire them to follow God's ways once more.

The same thing is true of the church at Corinth. Paul wasn't talking about the coming of Jesus at Christmas; he was talking to those Christians at Corinth about what Jesus had told them, that Jesus would be in their midst at any time, at all times.

Paul wanted them to awaken the gifts God had given to them and to be aware of the presence of God in their midst in Jesus, even though at that point, of course, Jesus had died, but had risen from the dead and was living in their midst through the Holy Spirit.

The same thing is true of the gospel lesson. Again, we might think of it as a way to remind us to prepare for Christmas, be ready for this celebration of the birth of Jesus. But in fact, when Mark was writing these words for the community of disciples after Jesus had died and gone back to heaven, Mark was reminding them again to be alert because Jesus is in our midst now. Be alert to the presence of Jesus.

That's what I think we ought to do as we listen to these lessons today, not think of them only as lessons that remind us to prepare in a special way so we can celebrate Christmas fervently and with great joy and a special kind of holiness, but we ought to listen to these lessons as God speaking to us at this very moment.

God can rend the heavens now and come into our midst, even as we gather here to celebrate this Eucharist, if we're alert to that coming of God. But there are many ways in which God comes into our presence if we're alert to it, and I think this is what the lessons are urging us, to keep in mind that God is always immediately at hand if we are alert, awake.

Last week I was participating in a huge remembrance celebration for people who had, over the years, been killed in Central America and Latin America. This demonstration was in Georgia at Fort Benning where there is a place called the School of the Americas. Part of the celebration and demonstration is a long procession and there were over 20,000 people there, so this is a very long procession, people walking in a line, four abreast. During that procession, a number of people read out names like "Oscar Romero" and everybody in the procession responds, "Presente!"-"he's alive, he's with us."

They go through the list of those tens of thousands of people, like the Jesuits who had been murdered on November 16, 1989 and the two women, the housekeeper and her daughter living with them. Or just unknown people, tiny children -- they'd always give the age of the person -- and the whole crowd would again cry out, "Presente!" As you walked along, you heard those names and you became aware, Yes, they are present because they're with God and God is present.

In a very powerful way I, and I'm sure everyone at that gathering, experienced God's presence right now with us, even as we remember those tragic, terrible events, that these people are alive, they're with God and God is with us.

There are many moments when any of us can have that awareness of God's presence if we are alert. I suggest that even right now. Jesus said, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am in their midst." So when we gather here for this Eucharist, we're gathering in the name of Jesus.

One of the reasons I really feel it's a blessing for me to be able to come here is that I do experience great faith among all of you, that you really are people who believe. You gather consciously in the name of Jesus, so Jesus is here with us. We need to be aware of that. We need to be more alert and ready to experience the presence of Jesus.

It isn't that we're going to look forward to Christmas and that remembrance of the birth of Jesus that's going to change us, enable us to really live according to the way of Jesus.

What's going to change us, what's going to make us genuine disciples of Jesus, ready to follow him, will be if we become aware, at any moment, at every moment, that God is in our midst, that Jesus is with us. So I invite all of us today, hear what Jesus says in that gospel lesson, "Be ready, be alert, I am with you," and the more we become aware of that, the more we will change and become the genuine disciples that Jesus calls us to be.

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