

## **First Sunday of Advent, B**

Today is the first Sunday of that season of the year we call Advent. As you know, the word simply means “coming” or “arrived.” We use it in this context to refer to the coming of Christ into the world. Of this, we are all well aware. Most of us celebrated Advent many times and are quite familiar with its meaning. But what we sometimes fail to recognize is that the coming of Christ is a three-dimensional concept. Our typical habit of thought is to limit it to only one meaning, or two at the most.

Usually, we think of Advent in terms of the Christmas story. This is when we pause to look back across the centuries and remember that the Son of God came into this world as a little baby, born of the Virgin Mary. That is the classic and historical meaning of Advent. At other times we turn our faces to the future, remembering that he has promised to come again, marking the culmination of history and the fulfillment of God’s purpose in the earth. For lack of a better term, we refer to this as the “Second Advent” or “Second Coming” of Christ.

Both of these meanings are doctrinally correct. They are clearly written in the Bible. They have been celebrated and proclaimed throughout the history of the Church. But if we stop with these and go no further, it has the practical effect of removing the coming of Christ from the experience of our daily lives. We need to open our minds to

one more meaning. We need to recognize that Christ not only has come in the past and shall come in the future, but does come in the present.

This, it seems to me, is quite possibly the meaning of our Gospel reading for today. Jesus told a story about a man who was getting ready to travel abroad. Before leaving, he turned the responsibility of his household over to his servants. To each of them he gave a specific task and this final word of instruction: “You do not know when master of the house is coming. Do not let him come suddenly and catch you asleep.” Then Jesus added this comment, “What I say to you, I say to all: Be on guard.”

Now, what is the message of this parable? What is our Lord telling you and me about life? At first look, it would appear that Jesus is talking about his final coming at the end of time; and we don’t want to discount that possibility. But if this is what it means, and all that it means, then it seems to me that we have two problems with the parable. One, it implies that Christian discipleship is a rather superficial thing, that we are like irresponsible children who stop fighting and clean up the house only because they think it’s about time for mother and father to come home. I hope our commitment to Christ goes a bit deeper than that.

Then the other problem – If this parable speaks exclusively of the final advent of Christ, then it is almost a mockery of every Christian generation but the last one. It is as if Jesus instructed his friends to live

in expectation of his coming, and then disappointed that expectation by failing to show up.

It seems to me that we have to give both this parable and the Advent a broader meaning than that. I think the Lord is trying to open our minds to the truth of his coming in the events and experiences of our daily lives. Surely, he is never far from us; and we should look for him, not just in the clouds of tomorrow, but in the streets of today.

Perhaps the first thing we need to do is teach ourselves to think of his coming, not as a threat, but as a promise. His exhortation to alertness does not mean that we should be feverishly anxious, but rather that we should be joyfully expectant. After all, the one whose arrival we anticipate is not a policeman with a search warrant. He is a loving friend who already knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us far beyond our power to even imagine.

Think of how those early followers reacted to his return after he had been away. He came one day to the home of Mary and Martha while they were in the midst of mourning the death of their brother. Someone told Martha that he was on his way. They could see him down the road; and Martha, being unable to wait, went down the road to meet him. Mary was in the house. When she heard that he was there, she leaped up from where she was seated and hurried into his presence. Her only regret was that he had not come sooner.

I remember one time that the disciples were out in the boat about a hundred yards from shore, and they saw Jesus standing at the waters edge. As soon as Peter recognized him, he did not wait to row the boat. He just jumped onto the water and swam to where he was. That was how his first friends reacted to his coming. How can we ever think of it as something to dread and to fear? Has he changed? Not at all; he is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Are we that much different from them? No, they were people just like us. It was just that they had found a faithful friend who had taught them the meaning of love and forgiveness. If we ever learn that then we will see his coming as a promise, not threat.

Next, we should look for him, not just in the big events of life, but in the small things as well. In the parable, the master gave each of his servants job to do, and then told them while doing it to expect his coming at any time. The two seemed to go together – the work and the return. An old family doctor who had practiced medicine for fifty years said, “I do not see how anyone can witness the birth of a baby and not believe in God.” There was a man who had learned to see the coming of the Lord in the doing of his daily work.

Oh, but you say that your work is too plain, no way to find God anywhere in it. What about Jesus? He wasn't a doctor; he was a carpenter. Simon Peter? He was a fisherman. The servant in the parable? Doubtless, they were doing household chores and taking care of the

farm. To experience the presence of Christ in the doing of our daily work depends not so much on the nature of the work, as the attitude of the worker.

If the heart is right and the mind is expectant, we will find him many places – in the face of a child, in the need of other people, in our joys, and even in our sorrows. Seems I remember his promising, “I will not leave you comfortless; I will come unto you.”

This is the Advent season, a very special time of the year. It speaks to us of the Christ who has come to us born of the virgin. It speaks to us of the Christ who shall come as the King of Kings. But it also speaks to us of the Christ who does come as a Friend to walk with us in the midst of all the pain and gladness of our daily lives.