

First Sunday of Advent

Today we begin a new liturgical year. It is the season of Advent, from the Latin word 'adventus', meaning coming. It is a season of longing for God, of preparing our hearts and our world to receive God when he comes. Many of the Advent readings, including today's First Reading and Responsorial Psalm, recall the longing of generation after generation of the people of ancient Israel, who experienced a special covenant with God and who longed for the Messiah whom they believed God would send them. We Christians believe that God fulfilled that promise in the person of Mary's child who said among other things to his friends: 'Many longed to see what you see and never saw it, to hear what you hear and never heard it' (Luke 10:24). Other Advent readings focus on our longing for the final coming of Christ in glory. Still others focus is on the many ways in which Jesus constantly comes into our lives now, and especially through our liturgical celebrations. We are preparing for Christmas, knowing that Jesus will come to each of us and to those we love in an especially intimate way. If we are not to miss his coming we must, as Jesus himself tells us in the Gospel, 'be alert'.

The Church goes to the prophet Isaiah for the First Reading to open the new liturgical year. It is a plea to God to 'tear the heavens open and come down' (64:1). The Gospel writers allude to this text in their account of Jesus' Baptism, for they see Jesus as God's answer to Isaiah's plea. The passage merits a closer meditation. When the author looks at his world he finds hearts dulled by a routine of life that pays little or no regard to the sacred. People are living on the surface, not thinking of the One from whom they are receiving life, and not caring to see that their way of life flows from God's inspiration and grace. The prophet looks around and sees people getting on with existence, but neglecting their soul, failing to get in touch with their deepest longings.

The religious leaders of the period after the return from Exile were intent on re-establishing what they had known, while avoiding the sins of the past. Not so the author of today's passage. He knew that they needed God to do something new. He remembers Sinai and the ways in which God was especially intimate with his people in their desert wanderings, and he begs God to come down again as he did on Sinai and startle people into realising how precious life is. Instead of a community filled with love for God and each other, he sees sin all around. He sees people as autumn leaves adrift from the tree of life and blown about by every sinful movement that happens to catch them. Rather than stretching out towards God, they were sinking in the sludge of mediocrity, dysfunctional behaviour and distraction. In short he sees them wasting their lives. He reminds God that we are no more than clay. God is the potter and he has to and can re-shape us.

If we find that any of these images strike home and express something of the way we experience ourselves, we can join the prophet in crying out to God and in this way we can open ourselves to God's healing love, for God is coming to us in a special way as we celebrate the feast of the Incarnation. We need God's grace, as did the people who

composed our First Reading, if we are to dare the new journey upon which God wants us to embark.

The Church of yesterday can be likened to a large barge, with straight front and sides and with a flat bottom, well built for navigating a river and able to carry everything. There were churches on it and schools and presbyteries and convents and monasteries. There were tennis courts for the CYO, and mother's clubs, and the children of Mary in their regalia, and the Sacred Heart sodality and the Legion of Mary. The priest was trained to pilot the barge along the river. The river had many bends, and it was not by any means easy-going. There were alligators and swamps, and every now and then rapids had to be negotiated. But on the whole the river was fairly predictable. The pilot could learn his job in a seminary and carry it out well if he followed the instruction book. This is a caricature, but I hope it captures some truth.

Our problem is that in our time the river has hit the sea, with obvious results for the barge. There is nothing wrong with reaching the sea: that is where rivers are meant to go. But the barge, which has done an excellent job in bringing us down the river, is not built for breaking through waves and negotiating the open sea. We have been experiencing chaos, as the waves crash against the flat prow of the barge, causing it to shudder and break apart, with the loss of much that it was carrying.

It is understandable that those on the barge suffered shock and many became desperate. Some tried to row back up stream, but that proved impossible. Besides, it displayed a lack of faith in the God of history and in the leadership of the Church, which agreed that the modern world is where the church wants to be. Some jumped overboard in one's and two's hoping to survive in small dinghies, bobbing up and down amid the waves. But dinghies are too small to carry the mission of the church, and are no better than a barge in the open sea. Others, unable to face what was happening, sat in the pilot's cabin and painted river scenes on the windows, trying to convince themselves and others that they were still in the river and that everything would be all right if everyone kept on doing what they were trained to do.

What has to happen, of course – and no one is pretending it is easy while the waves are crashing around us – is that we need to put a keel on the barge, and re-shape its prow. We need to make institutional changes that are faithful to the direction and task that has been given us, but that can cope with the waves and take us through them to the sea.

Jesus may appear to be asleep, but he is with us, as he said he would be, till the end of time. If we cry to him, he will inspire us, together, to refashion the craft so as to retain all that is good in her. We will be able to maintain direction and together continue our journey in a new environment, impelled by the love of Christ, directed by his Spirit towards our Father's home. Problems! Yes, but opportunities that have never existed before. Other rivers too have reached the sea. Communication media have made it

possible for people throughout the world to become more aware of each other and this has reduced not only ignorance but also the kind of fear that breeds off ignorance. Questions and attitudes arising in one place tend to spread, and we have become aware of common human questions that transcend traditional boundaries. It is possible for men and women of good will to speak to each other and listen to each other, as it has not been possible before.

Christ is certainly coming and we want to be ready for the special grace that he brings for us and for our children, our family, our church, our country and our world. Every pregnant mother and expectant father knows what it is like to be a month away from the birth of their child. Mary and Joseph are our models in this time of Advent as we await the coming of Jesus.

We do need the miracle of God's grace to enter our hearts, our churches, our world. Our faith teaches us that God is now pouring out over the world all the love we need to carry on the mission entrusted to us by Jesus – a mission that has as its goal that every human being lives to the full. The key is to be alert, and to do this we are to get in touch with our longing.

Let us conclude by listening to a song by an American Franciscan, John Michael Talbot. It is based on the opening verses of the Spiritual Canticle by Saint John of the Cross. It picks up the theme of longing. We are playing from the CD entitled: 'The Lover and the Beloved'. I hope it might speak to your own longing.

Where have you hidden Beloved? Why have you wounded my soul?
I went out to the wilderness calling for you but you were gone.
Oh shepherds keeping your watch in the hills,
if by chance you meet with my Love
tell Him I suffer in my lonely grief and I soon will die.
But I have searched for my Love in the mountains,
I have searched among the meadows and the fields.
He has poured out a thousand graces in them
so my heart might be healed. Yet my heart is not healed.