

2nd Sunday, Advent, Year C

Reflecting on the meaning of advent and Christmas, Mother Theresa of Calcutta said: "The season of advent is like springtime in nature, when everything is renewed and so is fresh and healthy. Advent is meant to do this for us and make us healthy, to be able to receive Christ in whatever form he may come to us. Circumstances of our lives are sometimes beyond our control, but our response and conduct are in our own individual power and hands. The liturgy today gives us a wake-up call as we chose our responses and measure our reactions to these circumstances. Advent is the Church's New Year. We started this period of waiting, not only for the celebration of Christ at Christmas time, but also for the end time, when Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. Tradition teaches us that we enjoy three comings of Christ: the first, the incarnation, the second, his return in glory and the third into each person's heart. These are key interventions of God.

Waiting is part of life and there is no life without it. All of us here waited for a while to be born, waited to be nurtured, and waited to be loved. We learn soon enough that the fullness of life is not available to us like instant coffee or tea. There is always more to life and to people than we can ever manage to absorb at any one time. So, we just have to wait. Unfortunately, patience is one virtue that we lack so much in the world today. Advent is a time when we are reminded that we have to wait for God. When we wait for God, we confess our own incompleteness; we acknowledge that there is always more to God than we know. When we wait for God, our waiting becomes a powerful prayer. We testify to our own poverty and to his greatness.

In the 1st readings of these two weeks, we get a glimpse of the difficulties that people face when their waiting for God seems to be in vain, that is, when they grow impatient. The exiles have just returned from the long and humiliating sojourn in Babylon in 538 BC. They were spurred on by a fresh hope that God loves them and has remembered them and will adopt them again as his people. But they found Jerusalem in ruins. God seemed to be far from them and their hopes did not seem to find any confirmation in the reality before them. They became exhausted with waiting. God's silence bored them and challenged their hopes. They needed to renew this hope by remembering what God had done for them in the past. They needed to bring the past into the present. Sacred memory acts like light in the midst of darkness. The memory of God's love is light enough. It gives us reasons to wait. It raises our hope and sense of meaning. What we remember keeps us awake to what is still to come.

The story of Jesus, the redeemer is the sacred story for our Christian tradition. It was the answer to the people's patience, expectations and rather long waiting. Unfortunately, some Jewish people did not still recognize him when he came. We are obliged to keep alive the memory of Jesus until he comes again. We live in-between times: between the first coming of Jesus and his second coming on the last day. We must wait together and stay awake to the times we live in. As we await for the coming of our Lord at Christmas, it might be good to ask ourselves some questions: where am I at the moment with regards to my faith? Can I test my faith with the level of patience in me? How has my worries and sometimes fretting and becoming frenetic about issues helped my friends and my family? Is there any way of slowing down to focus on people rather than on things or ideas? What are my plans for the Christmas? What sort of gifts am I going to give to the infant Jesus, is it the gift that I want to give or the one that will benefit the immediate beneficiaries? Can we think about the many children who are going to spend the Christmas without food, people who are displaced and who are hopeless?

The advent wreath represents hope. Its origin is found in the folk practices of the pre-Christian Germanic peoples who during the cold December darkness of Eastern Europe gathered wreaths of evergreen and lighted fires as signs of hope in a coming spring and renewed light. Christians kept this popular tradition alive by the 16th century Catholics and Protestants throughout Germany used these symbols to celebrate their advent hope in Christ, the everlasting light. From Germany, the use of the advent wreath spread to other parts of the Christian world. Traditionally, the wreath is made up of four candles in a circle of evergreens. Each week, each of the candles are lighted. As our nights grow longer and our days grow short, we look on these earthly signs, that is, the light and green branches and remember God's promise to our world: Christ our light and our hope will come. The prophet Isaiah says "the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those who lived in a land as dark as death, a light has dawned...." [Is 9:1-2]. The Church reveals herself as a sign of hope upon the mountain and to the contemplation of all. In our world, true members of the Church are those who create a network of more human relationships and more authentic life around them.

Fr. Innocent Abonyi, M.S.P.