

BIBLE READINGS: Isaiah 64: 1-9 Mark 13:24-37

SERMON

So here we are at Advent again. Advent, the beginning of the Christian year, and the time when we wait and prepare for the coming of the Son of God.

Advent is one of those "iffy" times ... one of the seasons of the church year when we become most conscious of TIME itself – when hopefully we will become conscious of the sacredness of time.

Now, generally we don't think of time as sacred. If we think about the concept of time at all, we think of it as a commodity, something to be bought and sold, something to be used up or wasted, something to be measured. For most of us, time is something we never have enough of. Even in the Church itself, the concept of time as a commodity rules our lives. Think of trying to set up a meeting. Out come the calendars and the lengthy process of negotiating begins. It seems that there is never a good time for a meeting or an event, so pressing are the demands of time on our lives. Time is always precious, even in the Church; seldom, though is it sacred. An hour or so on a Sunday morning is sacred, maybe enough time to squeeze in some worship and time to catch up with people, but rarely more than that.

This morning, though, this first Sunday of the Church's new year, is different. Advent calls us to consider time in a new way. Advent calls us to consider the ways in which we measure time, the ways we think of time, the way we use our time. The coming of the new year makes us realize that time, for us, is different, somehow ... that it is not a straight line originating somewhere in the haze of history and stretching off into the mist of the future. As Christians we do not live on a timeline, we live inside the great wheel of sacred time.

For all of us, at this time of the year, even in the shops where the lights twinkle brightly, the tinsel glitters, and the strains of Silent Night become just background noise, we are conscious that something is missing, something is not right. The pre-Christmas rush seems a little sordid, and yet we let ourselves be pushed to our limits by it anyway. The pre-Christmas time line becomes like a roller-coaster swooping and dipping as our heads spin. Some of us yearn to get off this madly rushing train, but we are strapped in for the ride, victims of the machinery which seems to have very little reference to God or God's son whose birth we are awaiting.

Advent, for us who keep the Christian year, is the antidote to the madness of the mall, the straight line to Christmas and the madly rushing train which rides on it. Advent is the time when the prophets call us to take stock of ourselves, to decide how ready we are for the coming of the Christ child ... and not in terms of whether the presents are bought and the Christmas pudding is cooked. Advent is sacred time, God's time, time to get ready for the return of the Light. It is the time for listening to the prophets who tell us how far we have strayed from God's plan for us, and for sincere and prayerful change. We would do well to listen to the prophets now. They are telling us what is missing, and it is terrifying. They are telling us how far we have strayed from the loving circle of God's sacred time, and they are calling us back into it. We would do well to listen to them especially at this time of year when the wheel is turning again, and the child is waiting to be born.

We would do well, sisters and brothers, to get off the train rushing headlong towards December 25th, and spend our time reading the prophecies and praying for the birth of the child again, to make ready in our hearts and homes a place for that child who comes again in power and great glory as Matthew tells us he will. We would do well to begin again in this Advent season, to look clearly into the darkness and the cold out there and pray and work for a decent and warm and orderly place for the baby to come into. To make ready in our hearts and minds a place for the Christ Child to come once again. This is the task of Advent,

indeed of all our time as Christians. The prophets are right: we must be ready, and the time is short!

John Powell - a Jesuit priest, tells this story in his book - Unconditional Love. Powell was working as a university professor and Tommy was the stereotype student who made a point of being different. He had long, long hair, before it was in fashion for male uni students. He took some kind of delight in sneering at the professor's ideas of an unconditionally loving God. They tolerated each other for the entire semester. As Tommy handed in his final exam he asked in jest, "Do you think I'll ever find God." Deciding on a little shock therapy the professor let the student get to the door before he said, "NO".

The student was suitably shocked. "Oh, I thought that was the product you were pushing".

"Tommy, I don't think you will ever find God, but I'm absolutely certain God will find you." Tommy shrugged his shoulders and left the class and the professor's life. In due course he graduated and the professor continued to teach other students. He never forgot Tommy.

Then a sad report. Tommy had terminal cancer. Before Powell could look him up Tommy came to his office. His long hair had all fallen out as a result of his chemotherapy treatments. He was thin and pale. "Tommy, I hear you are very sick", he blurted out, "I've thought of you often."

"O yes I am very sick. The doctors say it is a matter of weeks."

"Can you talk about it?"

"Sure, what would you like to know?"

"Well, what is it like to be 24 and dying?"

"Well it could be worse!"

"How?"

Well, I could be 50 and have no values or ideals and think that drinking, sex and making money were the real 'biggies' in life."

Powell saw a side to Tommy that he had never seen before. Perhaps he wasn't so stranger after all.

"But what I came to see you about was something you said to me on the last day of class. I asked you if you thought I'd ever find God and you said 'no'. Then you said that God would find me. I've thought about that a lot.

"When the doctors removed a lump from my groin and told me that it was malignant I got serious about locating God. And when the malignancy spread into my lungs I really began banging bloody fists against the bronze doors of heaven. But God did not come out. In fact nothing happened. I tried and tried and then I quit. I was too tired to try anymore.

"Then I remembered something else you said in class 'the essential sadness would be to go through life without loving. But it would be almost equally sad to go through life without telling those you loved that you did love them' "

"So I began with the hardest one, my Dad! He was reading the newspaper when I approached him and he wasn't too interested in talking to me. Then I said, "Dad I love you, I just wanted you to know that." Tommy smiled, "The newspaper fluttered to the floor. Then my father did 2 things I can never remember him doing. He cried and then he hugged me. Then we talked all night even though he had to go to work in the morning. It was easier with my mother and my sister. We hugged and we cried and we talked, I mean we really talked.

"Then one day I turned around and God was there. He didn't come to me when I pleaded with him. I guess I was like an animal trainer holding out a hoop, "C'mon, I'll give you three days ... three weeks." Apparently God does not march to our schedules. But the important thing was that God was there. God did find me. God found me even after I had stopped looking."

The trouble with us who have always been in the church is that we think we've arrived. We think we know all there is to know. Or we have given up and forget to turn around, to repent, and find that God is right there, looking for us.

In advent we come home; not to a place where we have been before but to a new home, to a place God has prepared for us. It is a place firmly grounded in God's great love for all people. It is a love that has the power to free us from our exile, our pain and suffering. It may not change the length or the outcome of our lives but such a homecoming will change our outlook, it will change the very core of our being.

So let us prepare for the advent of our God this Christmas.

Let us be prepared for as big a change as happened the first time. Let us be open to the power of God's great love. It is a power that can change our lives. It is a power that can change the world.