

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Dec 1st 2013

Today we begin the season of Advent, a season that invites us to assess our relationship with God and especially the Lord Jesus as we prepare for Christmas. What is Advent all about? We know it as a liturgical period, the beginning of the Church's year with a focus on the birth of Jesus at Christmas.

Advent has a kind of quiet dignity and a call to patiently awaiting God's coming into our human lives. And, let's face it we don't like to wait; we need patience and strength in facing the realities of our lives that stretch forward into our future. Often enough the reality of our lives confound us with difficulties. I was speaking with a man recently who, only three weeks previously, had open-heart surgery and he was beginning an exercise program to aid in his healing. I admired him for taking those steps in a long healing process and hoped that I could be as patient and positive as I found him if I were in his situation. I imagined his patiently awaiting healing as an Advent experience. What are those "Advent" moments that we encounter in our days and how can I find God in them?

In the first reading in today's liturgy, the prophet Isaiah speaks God's word of blessing associated with Jerusalem (the city of peace) and the attraction felt by the Israelites as they came to the mountain of God to hear the "instructions in the ways of the Lord." Walking in the light of the Lord meant to Isaiah striving for peace; the people would "beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks" and not "train for war again" if they walk in the light of the Lord.

What magnificent and challenging words these are! And as we look over our world today we see so much of the opposite of what the prophet calls for here. Instead of peace we find wars, violence of all kinds, and the anti-human effects of hatred in our own cities and countryside. In a word we find the same things that Isaiah found in his times. Where is the blessing here? That blessing is found in the ways that the Israelites (and we) gave themselves over to trusting God's word and working with patience for peace in their lives.

Scripture commentators speak of the "three" comings of Jesus. The word Advent connotes awaiting something and when applied to Jesus refers equally to his coming as an infant born of Mary in Bethlehem; to his continued advent in our lives as we receive Jesus more deeply in our hearts; and finally, to the ultimate coming in glory as the "Son of Man" at the end of the world. The Advent liturgies call us to consider all three of these "comings" of Jesus: celebrating with joy his birth to Mary and Joseph; receiving him gladly present to us each moment of our lives; and awaiting his coming in glory as the triumphantly loving Brother and Lord of our lives.

The gospel reading references the third coming of Jesus today. Jesus refers to the time before the flood when, except for Noah, people were basically unaware. They went about living their ordinary lives

(“eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage”) and, to their utter surprise the “flood came and carried them away.” Jesus says that is the way it will be in the end days. And, since we do not know the time the Lord will come, we are to “stay awake!”

The readings in our liturgy today remind us that as we go about our daily activities that we need to be aware of God’s goodness and love in the person of Jesus.

Lord, give us the patience and strength to focus on you as we await the magnificence of your love deepening in our hearts. Keep us faithful to the season of Advent so that we can recognize the “advents” that come to us as gifts from your hands. Help us to be aware of your goodness and the surprising ways that you come to us. Bless us during this time of Advent as we open ourselves to you anticipating your presence to us in Jesus our brother and Lord.

Tom Shanahan, S.J.