

2020 1ST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Last Sunday's 1st Reading from the Prophet Ezekiel presented us with a wonderfully comforting vision of God. God was pictured as a Universal Shepherd- standing on a hilltop watching over His scattered flock – there to bandage the wounded, quickly calling back those that were straying and at the right time leading His flock to new and better pastures.

It is a vision giving great hope.

This Sunday's 1st Reading- truly called one of the great jewels of Scripture- is quite different in its presentation of God. For it was written soon after the Babylonian Captivity. It is 537BC. The people of Israel had just returned to their homeland after 70 years as slaves in Babylon to find Israel wrecked. A few lines after today's Reading Isaiah addresses God lamenting: "Your holy cities have become a desert. Jerusalem is a wasteland. Our holy and glorious temple, in which our ancestors used to praise You, has been burnt to the ground. All delight in returning to our homeland is now shattered."

Isaiah's prayer to God is piercing, despairing, pathetic and desperate because He fears that God is no longer the Shepherd of Israel. It seems as if God has abandoned them as punishment for their constant state of rebelliousness. The people of the nation are compared to countless withered leaves which have been scattered every which way by the wind of their sins. And so, Isaiah yells out to God: "Oh, that You would tear open the heavens and come down. Come as a potter- shape us, mould us, craft us- come, be active in our history once again. Be to us a Father, a Redeemer. Come down!"

St Mark had this cry in mind when he described Jesus' Baptism- which inaugurated the Messianic era. Mark writes: "And at once as Jesus was coming out of the water, the heavens were torn apart and the Spirit like a dove descended on Him."

The anointing of Jesus as the long-promised Messiah is seen by Mark as the answer to the magnificent prayer of Isaiah that we have been gifted with today.

In today's Gospel Jesus says to us: "Be on your guard, stay awake, because you never know when the time will come. If the Lord comes unexpectedly, He must not find you asleep." We are challenged by the Lord to be ready for His Coming at the Parousia- the Last Day.

While the principal work of Advent is to prepare us to celebrate Christmas- the Lord's 1st Coming - today's Gospel focusses our attention on the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus- at the Parousia- when Christ in triumph will complete His work of redemption and God will be all in all.

We are a people awaiting the Second Coming of the Lord in glory. We sing after the Consecration at Mass: "When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim Your death, O Lord, until You come in glory."

How do we wait? I remember that shocking Chapter in Charles Dickens' 'Oliver Twist' describing Fagin's terror as he awaited execution in the morning. "With gasping mouth and burning skin Fagin hurried to and fro in such a paroxysm of fear and wrath, tortured by his evil conscience, that the two jailers recoiled from him in horror." Will we be like Fagin? Will we await the 2nd Coming, sweating with anxiety, crying out in fear? The answer must be 'No'.

Jesus, and the whole Teaching Tradition of the Church, presents the 2nd Coming as a joyful event. Yes, it will be unexpected. So we must be awake. But it is not to be feared. Jesus tells us to wait for His coming with joy and trust. Ignore those people who interpret contemporary disasters like Covid-19 and the Storms generated by climate Change as pointers to the 2nd Coming. The Last Day will not be a day of explosions and terror. It will be a day of Triumph and Joy.

We are told to stay awake- ready for the Last Day- with the expectancy of children on Christmas Eve, like men or women of the eve of their Marriage, like deacons on the night before their Ordination to the priesthood.

God is with us as a Potter gently shaping us, preparing us for that time when we will come into His presence.

May our prayer on that day be that of an alert door-keeper: "Lord, I see You coming and I welcome You. How wonderful it is to now sit at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb as together with all the angels and the saints we celebrate the eternal Marriage of Christ Our King to the Church in Triumph."

"Maranatha"- "Come Lord Jesus".