

1st Sunday of Advent B/2008

Imagine how embarrassing it would be for a babysitter when the parents, coming back from a party one hour earlier than expected, find her asleep and the children running all over the house. Such a situation could lead not only to a reprimand, but even to the loss of the job. That is exactly what today's readings in this First Sunday of Advent bring to our attention. They invite us to be vigilant, attentive, and ready to receive the Lord who is coming to free us.

In the first reading, Isaiah describes the prayer of Israel in time of distress and their hope in the saving power of God. In order to better understand this text, we need to know its context. In fact, after the return from the exile in Babylon, the people had held many dreams in terms of the reconstruction of the country, their spiritual renewal and the restoration of the temple. But all that did not work at all. Rather, they experienced frustration and always a gap between their deeds and the fulfillment of the Law.

For Isaiah, the real cause was the sin of the people. However, no human being had the power to save Israel except God, who is a father and a redeemer. Hence, they appealed to God's power and mercy. This appeal was based not on human justice, but on God's mighty deeds shown from the past. In order to make this appeal effective, the people acknowledged their sin before God and pleaded for forgiveness.

We know, however, that time and time again, Israel fell into sin and repeated the same mistakes as their forefathers. It is in that context that God sent his only Son into the world to be our Savior. Christ came in human flesh in this world; Christ is present now among us in many ways and, in particular, in the Sacrament of the Eucharist; but Christ will come again at the end of time.

The time of Advent is a time of reminding us that Jesus will come again; we should not forget this truth. The unfolding of human history gives us the impression that things will always be the same as it was yesterday, that as it was for our forefathers, it will be for us tomorrow. All this ends up by creating an illusion of thinking that the world will ever be there for us. The danger of such an illusion is to bring us to settle in and to lose sight that, here on earth, we are strangers and sojourners on our way to the encounter with Christ who is to come.

That is why Advent is also a time of waiting for the definitive revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. But, who can wait without being alert, persevering and awake? Of course, waiting and persevering requires the strength of God, but we have the assurance that we will succeed because God is faithful to his promise. Like the Corinthians to whom St Paul writes his letter, we have been enriched by God with many gifts and blessings in his Son Jesus Christ. We have to keep our hope firm to the end. We have to keep ourselves irreproachable until the day of the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is important to be alert, persevering and awake, because we do not know the time, the date and the moment when Christ will come back. We do not know the place and the circumstances in which he will find us. Any time he would come, if

he finds us vigilant and ready to welcome him, it would be our joy to definitively share in his life forever. If we sleep, it would be our misfortune of losing such a wonderful opportunity of sharing in the joy of Christ. That is the point of today's parable.

In fact, the historical context of the parable refers to the life of our Lord Jesus and his Church. Our Lord is "abroad", that is he ascended into heaven, where he is at the right hand of the Father, but he will come back. As a Church we are awaiting his return. How are we waiting, awake or asleep? To sleep means to give up the fight against evil and sins. It means also to let negative forces and values prevail over us. That is why this time of Advent is a time of self-examination of our lives before God. The sacrament of confession is an important tool the Lord gives us in order to purify our lives and our deeds.

This parable teaches us that everything has an end, including our own lives. The world will have an end; it is not eternal. Human history is going somewhere; there will be a consummation. Whatever might be the length of human history or our lives, one day the end will come. We have to prepare ourselves psychologically and spiritually to that end. We have to use the present time to the fullest in preparation to that end.

In other words, we have to work in this world with our eyes fixed on the world to come. It does not mean that we have to despise the present world. We have to do all our jobs as we should; we have to fulfill our duties as we should, as an anticipation of the world to come. Our final reward in heaven depends on how we would be good stewards of God's gifts in this world. In that sense, our daily work is participation and anticipation of the world to come.

Does the parable teach us to live in fear of the future? No; it only invites us to take advantage of the present time to prepare ourselves for the encounter with the Lord. We certainly know that the master will come, but we do not know when. Therefore, day by day our work should be completed. We must so live that it does not matter when he comes. We have the task of making every day fit and ready to see him face to face. In that sense, all life becomes a preparation to meet the Lord.

The parable reminds us of our responsibility for eternal salvation. Our salvation depends on how we respond to God's grace and initiative to save us. We have the freedom to do something for our salvation or to live a disordered life that will prevent our encountering Christ at the end of time.

Let us take advantage of Advent to prepare our hearts to welcome the Lord who is about to come. May he give us his grace so that we strive to be watchful and alert for any time he would come. God bless you all.

Isaiah 63, 16b-17, 19b; 64, 2-7; 1 Corinthians 1, 3-9; Matthew 13, 33-37



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