

First Sunday of Advent B/2011

At the beginning of this time of Advent that we start today, all the readings invite us to a deep attitude that should be ours throughout this week, namely vigilance and readiness in the awaiting of the coming of the Lord.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah describes the prayer of Israel at the time where the people were waiting the consolation of God in their distress. The reason why they were so hopeful in God was that, in spite of their autonomous existence, the people were aware that it was God who was their real father. Therefore, they could open themselves to him, trust in the power of his mighty deeds shown already in the past, and ask him forgiveness for their sins.

What is behind this text is the idea that whatever might be our position, what we do and who we are, no human being has the power to save us except God. After all, it is God who is our creator and we are the work of his hand. As a potter cannot reject the clay he formed, God will remain faithful to us. Another idea is the truth that if we want to find grace before God, we have to recognize our sins and ask him forgiveness. It is only in that way we can wait for him in peace and hope he will save us.

This text helps us deepen the meaning of Advent and understand what is at stake in today's Gospel. In fact, in the Gospel, Jesus is talking about his return that will happen at unknown time. He compares that return to that of a man who went on a trip abroad. Before traveling, he left his house and property in the hands of his servants. He gave a particular duty to each one of them and ordered the gatekeeper to be on the watch.

Jesus states also that because it is unknown at what time the Lord of the house will be back, it is in the interest of his followers to be watchful. Moreover, it would be disastrous if at his return he finds them sleeping.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing we learn is about the truth on the return of the Lord. In fact, when we look at our genealogy, it is possible to track it back to more or less ten generations. Such an observation can give us the impression that our history will always continue, if not through us, at least through our children, our grandchildren, our great grandchildren, and great, great, great grandchildren. With such a rationale in mind, it is very likely and easy to come to a statement as the world will be always there.

Against that background, Advent reminds us that we are all mortal, we and our human history. Therefore, we have to prepare ourselves, every day, for the return of the Lord. In that perspective, Advent makes sense as a reminder that we are not immortal on earth.

A second thing we learn is about the importance of waiting. As a matter of fact, we live in a society and a culture of instant coffee, fast food, direct E-mail, express flight and express line, etc. In such a culture, waiting becomes really problematic. We can easily see how impatient people are at the post office, in the supermarkets, at the confessional lines, etc.

But, here is the twist: what seems so normal to us because of the configuration of our society can become a real burden for our spirituality. We can be so impatient that we lose the real meaning of Advent. And yet, Advent means a time of waiting for the Lord

who is to come at an unknown time. But how can we wait without perseverance? How can we persevere without praying?

The third thing we learn is about the importance of cultivating the right state of mind. In fact, because we are waiting, it is important to have the right state of mind in this period of time. The right state of mind that Jesus recommends is not sleep, weariness, slack, but rather vigilance. Because we do not know the time, the date and the moment the Lord will come back; because we do not know in which place and circumstances he will find us, we have to be alert and prepared. The right state of mind we need to have is to be watchful.

Against this background, Advent means mounting vigil, being awake and not sleepy. To sleep means to stop fighting against evil and sins, to lose focus on the recommendations of Jesus. To be awake means to take advantage of Advent and make it a profitable time for our conversion and the rebuilding of our relationship with God and with our fellows.

The last thing we learn is about the importance of work. It is interesting to see that the man who was traveling abroad gave a particular work to each one of his servants. What it means is that in this time of waiting, we have to work hard and to stay active through our duties until the day the Lord comes back.

That is why, even if we know that human history will have an end, even if we know that our life will stop one day, we still have a duty to fulfill in the world in order to make it a better place to live in for ourselves and for the generations to come. We have to work hard and fulfill our duties in the world as anticipation of the world to come and participation in the kingdom of God.

In that perspective, Advent means an invitation to work now at the improvement of the human conditions in the world until the time the Lord comes again. Therefore, in spite of all the bad things happening in human history, we have to love the present world and never despise it. We have to love the present world and transform it to the image of the kingdom of God to come. Then, we can understand that Advent is not an invitation to laziness, but rather to diligence and assiduousness. As we work, we have, however, to fix our eyes on the goal of our life, which is our eternal salvation.

Let us take advantage of this wonderful time of Advent and prepare our hearts to welcome the Lord who will come by transforming our relationship with him and with one another. May he give us his grace so that we strive to be watchful and alert so that when he will come back he might find us vigilant. May God bless you all!

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



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