

First Sunday of Advent B/2017

The readings of this Sunday open the time of Advent. They remind us that we and our world are not eternal. They invite us to prepare ourselves for the return of the Lord who comes at the time we least expect it.

The first reading of Isaiah recalls the prayer of the people of Israel in the dark moment of their life as a nation. It describes how they referred to God and begged him to come and visit them. It describes also the sharp awareness the people had about the guilt of their sins. It expresses in particular their hope in the power of God who is capable of saving them.

What is behind this text is the idea that God alone is the creator and the savior of human beings. There is also the idea that God is merciful and forgiving of the sins of his people. Another idea is the truth that the recognition of our sins obtains for us God's forgiveness.

This text allows us to understand the stakes of today's parable as Jesus speaks of the surprising return of the Lord of the house who comes back at the unexpected hour. First of all, the Gospel starts with Jesus' speech inviting his disciples to be watchful and alert.

It gives an example of a master of a household who went abroad and left his servants in charge of his house. It reminds them to be watchful because the master of the house will come at an unexpected time. The Gospel finishes with Jesus inviting his disciples not to be sleeping, but watchful.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about the importance of waiting. In fact, in our society, waiting has become more and more problematic and a big deal. It is just a question of looking at people at the post office in order to realize how nervous they are as the line extends. The same is true when the line becomes long at the counter in the supermarkets, the airports and even at the occasion of the sacrament of confession.

Everybody is impatient and wants to pass first and very quickly so that his problem is over. And yet, the truth is that we are not alone in the supermarkets, the airports or at the confessional lines, etc. We do not live alone, but rather with other people who also have their own needs and their own problems they want to resolve like us.

Willing it or not, we have to wait with patience until our turn comes. We might be unhappy and annoyed about it, but that is what we have to do. Those who choose the easy way of delaying what they have to do today because the line is still long, wake up tomorrow with the same problem unresolved so that they have to start it all over again.

As we start the time of Advent, the Gospel reminds us that we have to wait for the return of the Lord. As Christians, we are the people of promise made to us by our Lord Jesus, namely that he will come back at the end of time. The whole point of today's parable intends to remind us that Jesus is coming back.

Here, however, is the problem we are facing: we do not know when, how and in what circumstances it will happen. We certainly know that Jesus will be back, because that is his promise, but we do not know when he will be back. That complicates things a little bit, because if you know exactly at what time your visitor is coming, you can be in a state of mind of waiting with assurance. But, if you do not know the exact time, there is a risk that

he will come and find you doing something different than waiting for him. That is exactly the challenge we all have.

In order to avoid any surprise, Jesus invites us to vigilance. The right state of mind we need is not sleep, weariness or slack. Because we do not know the time, the date and the moments of the return of the Lord, the place and the circumstances in which he will find us, it is better to be alert and prepared so that whenever he comes back he might find us watchful. To be watchful means to stop sleeping and fight against the evil.

That is why we have to take advantage of Advent as a profitable time God gives us for our conversion and the rebuilding of our relationship with him and our fellows. The fact that we are waiting for the return of the Lord does not mean that the things of this world are no more important. On the contrary, they are important, because our future depends on how we have been inspired by the word of Jesus and responded to his expectations while we were still on earth.

In that sense, we have to keep working for the Lord and be at duty, but always with the idea in mind that there is more to life than the things in which we are involved now. That is why, even if we know that human history will stop one day and our own life will end one day, we still have to keep working in making this world a better place for ourselves and the generations to come. We have to love this world and never despise it, in spite of bad things happening in it. We have to transform the world in the image of the kingdom of God to come. This task is important because the world we are waiting for when Christ comes back is anticipated in what we do today.

Advent reminds us that we are mortal, we and our human history. Therefore, we have to prepare ourselves, every day, for the return of the Lord and for the final day. We should not sleep on our cushions and think that there is nothing else to do than to enjoy life as it is here and now.

Advent invites us to patience and vigilance, because we do not know the day, the date and the moment of the return of the Lord. Let us take advantage of this wonderful time and prepare our hearts to welcome the Lord who comes at an unknown hour. Let us improve our relationship with him and with one another. May he give us his grace so that we strive to be watchful so that when he comes he finds 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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