

First Sunday of Advent B2020

I want to start today's homily with an evocation of an experience of life. 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 bring to our awareness in this First Sunday of Advent by inviting us to watchfulness and alertness.

Why shall we be watchful and alert? Because, like the people of Israel, there is a permanent danger, for us, to forget the sinful situation in which we are and all the real sins around us. Who can save us from such a situation unless it is God himself?

In the dark moments of the history of Israel, the prophet Isaiah perceived already that only God would save them. That is why, as we heard in the first reading, the prophet pleads with God; "You are our father and our redeemer. Why do you abandon us and let us wander far from your ways? Why are you angry with us? Why have you hidden your face from us? Why have you delivered us up to our guilt?"

At the beginning of this time of Advent as our world is beaten down with Corona Virus, this text of Isaiah takes a particular tone of reminding us of our real plague and the necessity of our Lord to come and set us free. Such a desire is in the line of what Israelites lived in the dark moments of their life. In fact, at that time, the prophet Isaiah perceived already how important it was for the Lord to come back and reside again with his people: "Return for the sake of your servants, the tribe of your heritage. ...Do come down", he says.

Besides this plea of the prophet, there was also the confession of sins of the people: "We are sinful; all of us have become like unclean people, all our good deeds are like polluted rags; we have all withered like leaves, and our guilt carries us away like the wind".

Recognizing our own sinful situation and weakness, how cannot we wish that prayer to be ours at the beginning of this time of Advent? How deeply we have to long for the return of the Lord! Advent, indeed, is a time we call upon the Lord so that he may come to convert us and to create a new heart within us, capable of following his ways and precepts.

However, the Gospel of today reminds us that as the "redeemer" comes, we have to remain vigilant in order to be able to receive his salvation, because we do not know the time he will come; we do not know the place and the circumstances in which he will find us. Whoever sleeps runs the risk of remaining slave of sin, and cannot be liberated.

The master, who has travelled abroad, after having given work to do to his servants and having invited them to watchfulness and alertness until his return, is the Lord Jesus himself. At this point, we have to recognize that we are both servants, each with our own task, and doorkeeper on the alert for Christ's return. We work and watch. We strive to make the Kingdom a reality and we are constantly looking out for the coming of Christ.

The truth, however, is that we are most of us better at working than at watching. Working is something we all know about, we do it every day. Maybe we went through some laziness in our lives, but once we realize how much was to be gained in this life by work, we found a new focus. A lot of us are very good at working; maybe some of us are too good, and we work to the exclusion of most things.

But working for the Kingdom of God is not just any other work. It is not a question of just putting more energy in. It is about making connections between peoples, it is about saying the right thing at the right time; it is about being in the right place for a right action, it is about touching the lives of others, it is about reaching out, it is about loving, caring, healing and forgiving. These are things we have to do in this time of Advent.

The master did not ask us only to work, but also to watch and wait. What we are watching and waiting for is Christ's coming. But it is in the very nature of Christ to be always coming, always arriving in a lot of different ways and in many varied guises.

For those with eyes to see, he comes walking toward us daily. For those who recognize him, Christ is always around. And this is what watching is all about. It is developing some very particular skills so that we are enabled to recognize him in his many guises. We need to train ourselves to be alert to his disguises, to notice the signs of his arrival, to be aware of his presence. And most of all perhaps we need to be able to enjoy his coming, especially his coming to us in prayer and through the Eucharist.

Let me finish by saying that you and I may not have turned away from God in dramatic ways. Still, we have done smaller things. But, if they could be carried to their logical conclusion, they would result simply in sin. During Advent we need to alert ourselves to the apparently smallest matters which can have enormous consequences for our relationship with God and our brothers and sisters. The small things can sometimes lead to a terrible end. We can overcome major challenges, but small things can bring us down. Let us ask the Lord to help us to be alert like the Christians of Corinth so that he may not find us sleeping. God bless you all.

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



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