

1st Sunday of Advent

Year C

Our Liberation From Fear

Fear is the most crippling of all emotions and there are many things in life and in the world to make us afraid. We lack integrity because we are afraid to be ourselves. But today we lift up our souls to Christ who comes to deliver us from fear. We can stand erect, hold our heads high, and dwell in confidence.

(Readings: Jeremiah 33: 14-16. I will make a virtuous Branch grow for David.
1 Thessalonians 3: 12 - 4: 2. May the Lord confirm your hearts in holiness when Christ comes.
Luke 21: 25-28, 34-36. Your liberation is near at hand.)

Occasionally we meet people who seem to breeze through life, no matter what fortune, or fate brings their way. Whatever the pressure of life, they seem to carry on with effortless ease. They never seem troubled by doubt or oppressed by misfortune. Somehow, they don't seem particularly anxious about the state of the world, or by whatever the future might hold.

Sometimes we cannot help but wonder whether these people have a secret inner recourse that somehow shields them, and which enables them to cope with all manner of things. In a more cynical mood, we might wonder whether they are really just sleepwalking through life, simply unaware, or blind to what is happening around them.

Conversely, we find ourselves, all too aware of both the major, global issues, and the lesser, more personal issues of our lives. There are times when the sheer scale of the world's problems, coupled with our own, simply overwhelms us, and we cannot help but wonder whether we can, actually, do anything to change the future at all.

Often, we wonder why we even bother, so much so, that in the end, we feel so sick and tired that we give in to apathy and despair. We are so small, and the world is so big and complex, that all our efforts seem wasted, as if we are scrambling for our 'last meal' before the destruction of Armageddon engulfs us.

We empathise with a widowed mother of 5, in war-ravaged Kabul, being interviewed by a news correspondent on her prospects under the Taliban, looking out from her bombsite dwelling, and says, "Nothing will ever change here.

In today's Gospel, Luke gives us the last address of Jesus' public ministry. And Jesus is clearly fretful about the future, as he paints a bleak picture of the end of the world. There is talk of nations in agony, of bewilderment, of people dying of fear, of the power which menaces the world. It is a nightmare view of complete and absolute disaster, which 'will come down on every living man on the face of the earth'.

Given that vision, of ultimate collapse, it is hardly surprising that, as Jesus anticipates, it might lead people to drink! After all, in the light of such a prospect, and in the face of such total catastrophe, being sober and awake, doesn't seem especially appealing.

On the whole, nightmares are frightful, 'bad experiences' from which we usually wake up, not experiences we stay awake for. And yet, that is precisely what Jesus tells us we should do, "Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen."

But why stay awake? What is there to stay awake for?

In Jesus' view of the future, there is another side to disaster. Jesus' forecast is one of liberation. Even so, after the horror story, we might take some convincing that it's not all horror. Jesus' view is that the terrible things, that will happen, are signs, signs that something else is happening, something happening in the saving visit of the Son of Man, at the end of time.

The 'disaster' is the last, or 'end age'. The good news is that out of that 'end age' comes the final liberation for the true disciple. It is what we pray for in today's Preface of the Mass; that... 'we who watch for that day may inherit the great promise in which we now dare to hope.'

Like the prophets before him, Jesus is painting a grim picture of the future, in order to influence what is happening in the present. He doesn't want to paralyse people with fear. Rather, he wants to energise them into action.

The real purpose of speaking of the 'final day' is to say something of the time we are in, of today, and that we should stay awake. And since the future is determined by those who share responsibility for shaping it we must stay awake to what is happening now. The future starts from where we are today!

Our Gospel encourages us to do two things, things which are difficult to hold together; to be realistic about the way the world is going, and at the same time, not to lose hope in the future. The danger is that we see the terror so clearly that, we lose our reason for hoping. And given the muddle we are often in Jesus has to convince us about a future which is truly liberating. The way he does that best, is through his own life, from his birth to his resurrection.

And so, Advent reminds us that we don't have to sleepwalk into the future. It reminds us of the story of Jesus once again. And that the memory of love becomes the grounds of our hope. The future holds hope only when, and because, we are convinced of God's actions in the past. That is why we retell the story again and again, beginning at each Advent.

We all need to be reminded of God's love, just as we all need to check the record, to assure, and to re-assure, ourselves, for when we do, we see something of how far-reaching God's love for us really is, most especially when we look at his Son. It is only when we keep looking at Jesus, not just in Advent, but throughout the whole year, that we can keep our right and proper reason for hoping.

It is in that hope, and in no other, that we can measure up the challenge of our first reading: to practice honesty and integrity in the land. And to dwell in confidence.