

## Homily for The First Sunday of Advent (Year B)(29/11/20) Fourth Sunday of the second coronavirus lockdown

Each year at the start of Advent I am drawn back to the small book of prison writings composed by the Jesuit priest Fr Alfred Delp in 1944-5 as he waited for death at the hands of the Nazis. Each year this book presents a call to a truly radical examination of ourselves, of our priorities and the ways in which we expend our resources: not just our money, but also our time and our energy. This book was written in a time and place where it seemed as if European civilisation was collapsing. Evil, fear, hatred, abuses of power, cruelty had all spread more fatally than any virus and had in many places become a new normality. No wonder this man in his prison chains finds himself writing *'unless we have been shocked to our depths at ourselves and the things we are capable of, as well as the failings of humanity as a whole, we cannot possibly understand the full import of Advent'*. We must, he tells us, be shaken to the depths so that we discover the truth of ourselves. This does not sound very cheerful stuff, but unless we are aware of how widespread the wreckage is, we will never be able to plan properly for the rebuilding of ourselves that is essential for the celebration of Christmas. What sort of offering of myself do I want to make at the Christmas crib? Unless I wake up to who I am, then I cannot hope to make an honest gift of myself to the newborn Saviour.

This has been the most extraordinary year. Of course, in no way has it been as apocalyptic as the times that Fr Delp endured, but it has been extremely challenging. None of us, I am sure, would ever want to go through something like this again. But it would be a crying shame if we did not stop to ask, what have I learned about myself in this time? In a sense the whole of 2020 has been a kind of Advent, a time of dismantling the familiar world and examining it. Much of the year, spent in lockdown, has been a kind of silent time of simplified living, pared down to the essentials, like the quiet and empty stillness of Advent. It is strange that Advent feels so different to Lent. It is shorter, of course, but the real difference seems to come from the changing of the seasons: in Advent the days are getting shorter and darker, in Lent they are getting longer and brighter. In Advent it feels as if we are plunging into the darkness, in Lent it feels as if we are emerging from it.

The idea of Advent as a time of plunging into darkness resonates with our experiences this year. Like someone walking through the pitch darkness, we have been proceeding cautiously, not sure what lies around us, knowing that there is danger there, but unable to see it; not quite knowing where we are going, not quite knowing where, when or how the darkness will be lifted. But what have we learned about ourselves? What are the things that have shocked us? There is much talk about when we might return to 'some sort of normality', but is that really what we want? Do we want to go back to the world as it was a year ago? Is that really the best that we can do? If we go back to where we were, doesn't that mean that everything that we have learned about ourselves this year has been wasted?

So, there is work to be done this Advent. Here are some questions to think about.

Looking back over the past year, what are the things that I have really missed? What does this tell me about myself, and about where my priorities lie?

What are my dreams for the world after this is all over, and for my place in it? What can I do to make sure I do not squander these dreams and allow them to be overwhelmed by the desperate temptation to go back to business as usual?

What have I already discovered about myself that I want to hold onto and treasure for the rest of my life in this time?

It seems strange to look at it like this, but really this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to reset the way that we live. This is the day to sit down with paper and pen and write a letter to ourselves to be opened on December 31<sup>st</sup> 2021, a letter that tells us what we really hope our new life will be like. Without something like this the temptation to let all we have learned slip through our fingers will be almost impossible to resist.

Almost the last words that Fr Delp wrote in his prison cell were these:

‘If through one person’s life there is a little more love and kindness, a little more light and truth in the world, then he will not have lived in vain.’

Love, kindness, light and truth: if Advent this year helps us embed these things even more firmly in our everyday lives, then it will not have been in vain either.