

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The First Sunday of Advent (Year B) 3rd December 2023

Advent is the season of darkness, flecked with distant pinpricks of light. It is the season of plaintive hymns and songs, of emptiness, and silence; a season in which we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by what is missing, what we lack, what we long for. A season of plaintive longing: 'Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down!' The world seems dark, and as we set out at the start of our Advent journey we are aware that the darkness is growing stronger, the daylight growing weaker. The darkness is always disorientating: it is always full of invisible obstacles and imagined dangers. Even the most familiar landscape, or a room that we live in every day, seems to shift and change shape, to become a pitfall for the unwary, a bewildering and unsettling place. How we need a light!

In the darkness of Advent, a darkness that is never quite complete because it is peppered with points of light, listening to the melodies of longing, we are aware of a great sense of need. We are aware that there is so much that is lacking in our lives, so much that is missing, so much that we need as individuals, and so much that we need as a world, as a culture. So, one of the things about Advent is a deep sense of need, of longing for something more, something better. As Christians it is our responsibility in this season to tune into this characteristic of the season. Before we can possibly think about the feast that closes the season, we need to be tuned in to how great is our need. The years are hastening on; the world is growing old; we do not know how much time is left, we must stay awake to all that is lacking.

Which brings us to the second characteristic of Advent: it is formed from a deep sense of need, of all that is lacking, but also a sense of urgency: a sense that we cannot put it all off to another day, that we cannot ignore all that is lacking in our world and hope that it will go away, or that someone else will sort it out. If the light is to be spread among every shadow of darkness, then we must begin now.

And finally, as well as the characteristics of deep need, and urgency of action, this is a season heavy with a sense of hope, of joy expected, a sense that the lifting of the weight, the scattering of the darkness, is very near, almost at the door. 'Christ is nigh!' the herald calls. Our need is great, if we would just stop and look, and once we realise how great is the need we will see how near is the Saviour: but those who think they need nothing will not see the Saviour, because they will have deluded themselves that they do not need him. And so, unwittingly, they make the world's darkness deeper.

Advent carries with it the call to get real, to stop pretending that all is well when, in fact, the world is very sick indeed. Medicine needs to be administered, and we need to open our mouths in order to receive it. Shutting our eyes will, of course, mean that we can no longer see how strong the darkness has become, but the darkness will still be there. We cannot solve the problems by ourselves, we just seem to go round and round in circles. We need some intervention from outside. All our unaided attempts to make the world better only seem to make it worse. It may sound corny, but the world desperately needs an injection of love, a love that is

more profound than any that we can imagine for ourselves. And that is precisely what it will receive at the end of this season, and that is why this is a season heavy with hope.

The world can be better, can be renewed, can be refreshed; but all our attempts to do this have just made it worse. The refreshing needs to come from outside, and we need to open ourselves to the love of God, made tangible for us in Christ. There is no need to give up hope, there is no need for despair. The world is old, but not yet senile; it is sick, but not yet fatally so; it is dark, but not completely black; it is noisy with a cacophony of competing voices, but the strains of harmony can still be heard.

The work of this season, for us Christians, is first of all to make sure that we are not distracted. Of course, there is lots going on in our secular lives, and much of it is good and important and lifegiving, so we certainly don't need to turn our backs on it at all, but we mustn't let it become the limit of our attention. It is all good, and right and proper, but it is not enough. Then we must let ourselves be aware of that Advent theme of great need: we need so much as a world, and we need so much as individuals. What is it that you feel you need most? Then, and perhaps this is the hardest part, I need to allow myself to believe that this need can, indeed, be met. The love of God will come to our world, and even if most people 'know him not', I will know him. The world can be renewed, even very slightly, even just in a few places, if we just stay awake, stay alert, alert to the depth of the need, to the urgency of response, and to the medicine that is offered. Christmas, when it comes, will only mean anything to us if we have worked hard in advance at taking to heart just how much we need to be swept up into a story that is filled with humility, and love, and solidarity, and generosity and hope. Our job in these next three weeks is to get ready to act in the drama, not merely to watch it from afar.