

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for First Sunday of Advent (Year C)
Sunday 28th November 2021

Confirmation of Joseph Chuter at 9.30am Mass

'Stand erect, hold your heads high, because your liberation is near at hand.'

The wheel of the year has turned full circle, and we begin once again with Advent. This is a season in which we re-set our lives, we re-tune all of the details that have become jumbled and out of position over the past months. We want to be ready: ready to kneel before the crib and look in wonder at the child, and ready to greet our Saviour when he comes to us as a judge. So, what is the standard to which we re-set our inner lives?

In today's Collect we ask that we might be resolved to 'run forth' to meet Christ: not to greet him hesitantly, or anxiously, or half-heartedly, but with enthusiasm. We can imagine ourselves, perhaps, running to the manger to see the child – after all, that is exactly what the shepherds will do a few weeks from now; but running forward to meet our judge, can that ever make sense?

In the Gospel Jesus tells his followers that at the first sign of his coming they are to stand erect, with their heads high, because their liberation is near at hand. Although sometimes we kneel in the presence of God, or even prostrate ourselves on the ground, the default posture of the Christian is standing with our heads held high. This is the posture of Advent, standing tall, even climbing up onto our toes so as to catch the first glimpse of the rising sun, the first hint of dawn in the darkened sky.

Standing is a sign of respect: someone important enters the room, and we stand to greet them. This is a sign that their arrival does not leave us unmoved, it is not a matter of no interest to us, it is important enough to disturb our comfort and bring us to our feet. So, standing erect means that we are ready to welcome the Lord into our lives, into our world, into the decisions of everyday living. We recognise that he is important, his presence will disturb us and unsettle our comfortable ways, and we are up for this. We stand to greet him.

Standing is also a sign of being attentive and ready to act. The person who stands is poised; he (or she) is listening carefully, reflecting on what he hears, and then ready to jump into action. That is why we stand for the Gospel reading: we are respectful of Christ as he comes among us, we are attentive to his words, and we are poised to act on what we hear. The Gospel is not read simply to make us feel good, or to educate us, it is read to spur us into action, and standing to hear it shows that we are ready for this. Standing is the posture of the soldier on duty, or the servant in attendance, alert to any tiny sign that something might be needed from them (Romano Guardini 'Signs of The Holy One').

Standing is also a sign of vigilance, of being on the watch. The nightwatchman patrols the walls of the city looking out into the darkness for any sign of danger: for the lamps of an enemy army, for the strange quality of an altered blackness that alerts him that someone is out there. In ancient times Syrian monks were known as 'those who remain standing' (Pope Benedict XVI Homily for Chrism Mass 2008), that is to say the ones who are always on the look-out, gazing deep into the culture of the world around them, always scanning the horizon for signs of danger and for signs of hope.

It is not just standing that the Lord tells us to do, but standing tall, standing erect with our heads held high. This sort of standing is a sign of pride, a sign of confidence. We can be sure that the Lord calls us by name, that he knows us and that he has plans for us that are good.

Standing is also a posture of prayer. In the wall paintings of the catacombs the redeemed souls stand to pray in the presence of God. They have been saved, all is well, and so they can stand before the Father with confidence.

Advent, then, is a time for standing: a time for standing tall and attentive. Where can I see the signs of God's presence in our world? Where can I see him at work, and where can I see that his presence is needed? I am ready to welcome him into my life, ready to allow him to disturb me and even trouble me. I am attentive, waiting to know what he might want from me. I am watching for dangers, for threats that might build a wall between me and him, between me and reality, but also I am watching for opportunities.

Every one of us is called to be, wherever we may be, in our homes, in our workplaces or schools, our groups of friends, the 'pleasing fragrance of Christ' (Rite of Confirmation). *[The gift of the Spirit that is poured out on Joseph in confirmation, and which has been poured out on many of us in our own confirmation, is given to us precisely for this purpose: to bring us closer to Christ, deeper into the heart of the Church, so that the gifts of the Spirit may enable us be Christ in our world, to make his presence known where we are present. In confirmation the Bishop, or the priest, stretches his hands out over the candidate. This is partly a gesture of protection, of shelter, as the Church extends her loving hands over him to shield him from the danger of the world; but it is also a gesture of possession. You are Christ's, now, he claims you as his own so that your life may be fulfilled by making his love, mercy, peace, wisdom known in the world.]*

The virtuous branch which God raises will practise honesty and integrity in the land. We are to be that virtuous branch. It, we, will be a source of confidence, a source of hope. Because honesty and integrity will be our watchwords we can dare to stand, heads held high, in his presence. And if we are standing, watchful, alert, respectful, ready, prayerful and attentive then we will be ready to greet Christ; but more than that, we will be ready to enrich and transform the world so that it, too, is ready to greet him. Making the world more ready for the coming of Christ: there is a recipe for Advent well spent, indeed there is a recipe for all Christian living.