

The 1st Sunday of Advent (Year A); Hope for the future.

1st Reading: Isaiah 2:1-3: The hope of a peaceful future for Jerusalem;

2nd Reading: Romans 13:11-14: The ‘time’ has come: wake up & change!

Gospel: Matthew 24:37-44: The unexpected may happen – be prepared!

Decades ago, an elderly priest-friend was talking about abstinence from alcohol. He said: “I don’t give it up in Lent. No human can be drink-free for six-and-a-half weeks. I give it up in Advent, which is only three-and-a bit weeks.” Well this year, he would have been upset: because Christmas Day is a Sunday, Advent is a full four weeks long. Just to warn you....

This weekend, the Church starts a month of ‘pretence’. I do not mean this in a bad way, such as Qatar ‘pretending’ to be a sporting country. They seem to have spent billions of pounds on persuading FIFA to give them the current football World Cup and on building huge stadiums in the desert. Few people expect those to be used very much afterwards, so it looks like a costly form of a child ‘pretending’ to be a doctor, nurse, spaceman, or whatever! No. Our ‘pretence’ is to try to imagine the world before the Messiah came: that Old Testament era when people were desperate for spiritual leadership & hope. This is why so many first readings in Advent are from Isaiah; he was the prophet who bemoaned abysmal rule by Old Testament kings. He looked forward to God intervening to bring good government, with a spiritual purpose. Thus, the Advent readings try to help us appreciate what Christ’s coming really meant.

I hope I do not shock you (or upset superiors!) when I say that I am disappointed by the choice of readings for this weekend in all 3 years of the cycle. Those who planned the lectionary (the book of Mass readings that started in 1970) wanted to link the start of Advent with our being ready for the other coming of Christ – at the end of the world. This is why the gospels for all 3 years are taken from Jesus’ warning (just before his arrest) that we should be prepared for the coming climax of human history. To be fair, there is nothing new in this idea: the pre-1970 missal (which came from ancient times) had exactly the same theme. It has always made theological sense, but it does not really help the ordinary preacher to engage the interest of the people in a parish.

In the first reading, Isaiah expresses his hope that better days will come for “the mountain of the Temple of the Lord” – in other words, Mount Zion, the spiritual heart of Jerusalem. This hilltop will “tower over the mountains and be lifted higher than the hills”. It will attract people from all over the world, who

will go up to it to “be taught God’s ways” and “walk in his paths”. Given the shambolic rule of the kings of Judah when Isaiah wrote (730’s BC) and the threat of invasion from abroad, this is a very hopeful statement. He wants God to influence the country, so that everyone would see that it was divinely inspired. The practical result of this would be the gift of peace. In a famous passage, he writes: “They will hammer their swords into ploughshares, their spears into sickles. Nation will not lift up sword against nation; there will no more training for war”. That is some hope! Are we still waiting?

Well, yes. Although Jesus is known as “The Prince of Peace”, he himself assumes that there will be conflict and war in human history. On one occasion, he warns his followers: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves, so be as cunning as serpents, yet as harmless as doves.” (Matt 10:16) To me, this implies that our work involves engaging with an unsympathetic world. Our message and behaviour must speak of peace, but we cannot afford to switch our brains off: we must use ingenuity & diplomacy to preach the gospel.

I suggest that this lies behind Jesus’ words in this Sunday: “Stay awake, because you do not know the day when your master is coming.” The idea of ‘being prepared’ applies to each of us when thinking of our own death – when Christ will come again, for you and me personally – but also to the Church as a whole, when thinking of its mission to the world. I fear that, in recent years, RC dioceses sometimes seem to have forgotten their real purpose – to offer the clear spiritual leadership which people need. No diocese can do this when so much energy is used-up with child protection court-cases, creating even more admin office-jobs, liturgical arguments, and so on.

I think St Paul offers the best comment this Sunday, when he says: “The night is far gone; the day is at hand. Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light...the Lord Jesus.” (That old translation has Paul’s sharpness & urgency.) He is not talking of night & day in the sense of bed-time and getting-up time; by “night” he means that part of human history before Jesus Christ; by “day” he means human life as lit up by the light of Christ’s influence. However, the “night” is not fully over: there are many who still live as if Christ had never come – their lifestyle (“drunkenness, licentiousness, promiscuity, jealousy, etc) is that of the “night” or “dark”. The Church’s task is to try to persuade them that their lives would be happier with the light of Christ. In these dark days before Christmas, that’s a tall order! *Fr Jim Dunne.*