

November 29, 2009

On Sunday, we begin the new Church year with the season of Advent. Advent is one of my favorite times because it is a season of joyous anticipation and hoping, a season which invites us to renew our trust in God's merciful love, care, and promise.

Advent reminds us that we are pilgrims living in three time zones. We stand between the "already" and the "not yet." We renew our hope and confidence in Jesus' return in glory at the end of time by recalling His first coming among us as a child at Bethlehem and by sharpening our awareness of Jesus' abiding presence among us now in word, in sacrament, and in one another. The past, present, and future all converge in this holy season.

A large banner suspended in front of St. Mary of the Lake Church in the Miller section of Gary reminds us "Jesus is the reason for the season." During Advent, we remember Jesus' first coming in Bethlehem. Throughout the Old Testament, God reminded His people how deeply He loved them and how faithful He is in His love. In speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus reminds us how His taking on flesh has become the greatest manifestation of God's love: "Yes, God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him may not die but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him" (Jn 3:15-17).

During Advent, we prepare our hearts to respond evermore fully to God's love by seeking to change any patterns of our behavior that are displeasing to God and by making peace with anyone with whom we may have become estranged.

How appropriate to make a thorough examination of conscience and to participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. As we face the truth about ourselves and hear the consoling and renewing words of absolution, we will experience an overflowing of peace, joy, and new confidence in living as faithful disciples of Jesus who is our peace, reconciliation, and the way to life and love in abundance.

We might also prepare to celebrate the outpouring of God's love on that first Christmas by taking more time for prayer each day, perhaps before the Blessed Sacrament, by meditating upon God's Word, and in being more sensitive to the gifts God has given us in one another.

The above practices, at the same time, prepare us to meet Our Lord and Savior when He returns in glory at the end of time. That blessed event should not be a cause for fear or anxiety. At each Mass, the priest prays a beautiful prayer in anticipation of Christ's coming in glory at the end of time: "Deliver us, Lord, from every evil, and grant us peace in our day. In your mercy keep us free from sin and protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of Our Savior, Jesus Christ."

I have visited many people on their death bed who experienced the fruitfulness of that prayer. They were tranquil and obviously at peace. When I visited Monsignor Charlebois before his death, he witnessed to our common faith in the gift of life everlasting. In a most tranquil and peaceful way, he said: "God is faithful. God is good. His will be done."

In his weeks prior to death, Cardinal Bernardin witnessed very powerfully to our belief in Jesus' second coming when he said: "I view death not as an enemy but as a friend."

Life is, indeed, a pilgrimage. We have no lasting home here. The Lord has something in store for us who believe in Jesus and are nourished by His Body and Blood, far better than anything we can imagine in this life. Jesus has, indeed, conquered sin and death through His own death and resurrection. During Advent, we renew our hope and confidence in God's faithfulness and promise.

At the Last Supper, Jesus promised that He would not leave us orphans. He promised to send us His Holy Spirit to abide within us if we love Him and keep His commandments. How comforting! We are never alone. God chooses to dwell within us for He has made us temples of His Holy Spirit.

Jesus has also promised to be present to us "where two or more are gathered in my name." He admonished us that whatever we do to the least of our brothers and sisters, we do to Him. He is also very present to us in His Word (the Holy Scriptures) and so powerfully present to us in the Holy Eucharist.

During Advent, as we prepare for Christmas and Jesus' return in glory, we remember the generosity, compassion, love, and abiding presence of God to us. We can say, in the words of St. Paul: "I live now, not just I, but Christ lives in me."  
A Blessed Advent to all!