

First Sunday of Advent

I've been thinking a lot this week about how fortunate we are to have St. Francis de Sales College as part of our parish. On Tuesday night we had the AGM of the College Board. We heard from those who were passionate about why they wanted to join the Board or to be re-elected onto it. On Wednesday morning it was announced to the staff that Gavin McGlaughlin, who had been acting principal this year, had been appointed Principal for the years ahead. The response of the staff would make you think that they had just won a lottery. Their affirmation of his appointment was quite moving. On Thursday evening I took part in the beautiful Liturgy to celebrate the end of Primary School for the Year 6 students. It was an opportunity to acknowledge how well they had used the gifts that God had given to them. In some ways you could say that these were extraordinary events in the life of the College. But on Wednesday afternoon I experienced something of the wonderful pastoral care that is offered by the College on a daily basis. A parent of one of the younger students had asked if he could be supported in the way that he might talk to his daughter about the death of her grandmother. He was asked if he would like me to be there with one of the staff as he talked about this. He was grateful for the offer. I was grateful for the opportunity to see how well the staff member supported this parent.

I consider it a privilege to listen with people as they try to make sense of the death of their loved ones. I find that they have often learnt so much already about how to cope with death from the people who are dying. The dying can teach us so much about living. I have learnt that it is not easy to die. There is always some pain involved in dying. The physical pain of those who are very sick can usually be managed. But the pain of saying goodbye to those we love is a pain that is shared by those who are dying and those they leave behind.

For those who are awake and ready for the Lord to come, death can be a long-awaited joy. We all need to learn how to die. We all need to practice how to meet the Lord and how to say goodbye to the people and the things we love.

Our gospel would suggest that we learn how to meet the Lord by being attentive to whatever tasks he has given to us. In our gospel story the man going abroad leaves his servants in charge of everything he owned, each of them with his own task. The doorkeeper had to stay awake to open the door to him whenever he came back, even if he came back in the middle of the night. We practice being ready to meet the Lord by looking out for him in whatever way he may come to us. We learn how to recognise the Lord in the people who may come to us for help. We learn how to recognise the Lord in the people who love us and care for us. We learn how to welcome the Lord when we look for the reflections of his

beauty and power in the things around us that he has made. We learn how to welcome the Lord even by knowing where not to look for him.

We learn how to say goodbye to those people and things we love by learning how to become less attached to the good things that God has given to us to use for a while. Moving to a smaller house or unit can be good practice for dying. We have to give away many of the things that we thought were important for us. We come to understand that they are not so important. Moving to an aged care facility is something that very few people look forward to. Our loss of independence is something that most of us would feel deeply. Yet even that can be a help for us to understand how dependent we are upon the God who loves us and wants us to be with him forever.

Today we are entering into the season of Advent. Advent is a time of waiting. We are waiting to celebrate the feast of Christmas, when we rejoice that Jesus came into our world as a helpless baby. We are waiting to welcome him again. But in these first few weeks of Advent we are thinking more about how Jesus will come again at the end of time to complete the work he began while he was here with us two thousand years ago.

Most of us hope that we are going to be in a box seat in heaven to watch the second coming of the Lord from there. Being ready at the end of our earthly life for the Lord to come to welcome us into the joy of heaven is what we need be concerned about. Advent helps us to be ready. We listen to many beautiful readings from the Prophets during Advent to prepare our hearts for the Lord's coming. Today we prayed with the Prophet Isaiah: "Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down." Isaiah helps us to reflect upon those things that prevent the Lord from coming to us. "We have all withered like leaves and our sins blew us away like the wind. No one invoked your name or roused himself to catch hold of you. For you hid your face from us and gave us up to the power of our sins." But our reading today ends with a word of hope. "And yet, Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, you the potter, we are all the work of your hand."

Our prayer today is that the Lord would continue to mould us and form us into the people who wait with joyful hope for the Lord to come.