

## 1<sup>st</sup>. Sunday of Advent

I hope that I never lose my ability to be surprised. On Monday last I took my binoculars and camera to the Scott Conservation Park, a place where birds feel at home. I saw a Musk Lorikeet coming out of its nest and so I waited with my camera ready, hoping that it would return. I stood there for a long time quietly waiting. But then out of the corner of my eye I saw another bird, one I didn't recognise. It flew into the tree right beside me and invited me to take its photograph. I was later able to confirm that this unexpected visitor was a beautiful juvenile Golden Whistler.

Today we begin the season of Advent. It is the season when we learn to expect the unexpected. It is a time of waiting, of being prepared, of being vigilant for the coming of the Lord. Throughout the Season of Advent, we think of the three comings of Jesus: His coming in history at Bethlehem, His coming in mystery in the Church, and his coming in majesty at the end of time. At the beginning of Advent, we are called to think about the end of our lives here on earth, in terms of being ready for the final coming of the Son of Man. We are being urged to stay awake and stand ready for the coming of the Lord. We are being asked to look at how we are living now so that we may be where we want to be when the Lord comes.

The gospel passage belongs to the kind of literature that we call apocalyptic. It is part of that body of scripture that speaks about the end of the world and the coming of the Son of Man. But Matthew reworks what we read in Mark and Luke. He does not spend much time describing the things that will be associated with the coming of the Lord. He uses some little parables to urge us to be ready for his coming. The coming of Jesus is like that Golden Whistler. It is something that we will not be able to predict. "As it was in Noah's day, so it will be when the Son of Man comes... They suspected nothing until the flood came and swept all away." We will be like the people of Noah's day, not knowing that the flood was coming until it had washed over them.

Is not that our experience already? How many of us have had to face the unexpected death of someone we love? How many of us have had a job one day and then without much warning we find ourselves unemployed? How many of us have experienced the breakdown of a relationship that we thought was secure? How many of us have received the results of a medical test that has changed how we have had to face tomorrow?

Because we cannot predict these kinds of things, we can hardly prepare for them. But there is a sense in which how we live each day does prepare us for the unexpected. That I was waiting to take a photo of a bird

returning to its nest meant that I was ready to take a photo of the bird a few metres from my shoulder. We cannot predict the final coming of the Lord. But we can prepare for it by living each day as well as we know how. We can practice how to meet the Lord of Love by living each day with as much love as he has given us to share.

St. Paul's letter to the Romans has something to say about this today. "You must wake up now; your salvation is even nearer than it was when you were converted. The night is almost over, it will be daylight soon. Let us give up all the things we prefer to do under cover of the dark; let us arm ourselves and appear in the light. ...Let your armour be the Lord Jesus Christ." If Christ is our armour, if we are clothed with his love, then we will choose to live like him. We will do the things that are thoughtful and generous and life giving to others. In the many small and sometimes bigger opportunities that come our way to be of service to one another, we will make the most of those opportunities and let Christ's power to love become real and practical.

Despite the warnings that we are being given in today's gospel and in the letter that Paul writes to us, there is also a strong word of hope that comes through to us. This hope is especially present in our first reading from the Prophet Isaiah. He talks about the transformation that

will come over the world and its people when the kingdom of God is fully established. Swords will be turned into ploughshares, spears into sickles; there will be no more training for war.

Pope Francis was in Japan this week and visited Nagasaki. There he said, "Dear Brothers and Sisters, this place makes us deeply aware of the pain and horror that we human beings are capable of inflicting upon one another. One of the deepest longings of the human heart is for security, peace and stability. The possession of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction is not the answer to this desire; indeed they seem always to thwart it. Here in this city which witnessed the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences of a nuclear attack, our attempts to speak out against the arms race will never be enough. The arms race wastes precious resources that could be better used to benefit the integral development of peoples and to protect the natural environment. In a world where millions of children and families live in inhumane conditions, the money that is squandered and the fortunes made through the manufacture, upgrading, maintenance and sale of ever more destructive weapons, are an affront crying out to heaven." As we begin our Advent journey to prepare for the coming of the Prince of Peace, may the words of Pope Francis be heard with attentive ears and open hearts.