

1st. Sunday of Advent

Each day we are hearing and reading about the preparations that are being made to protect the River Murray towns from being flooded. As the river rises so does the anxiety of those who live close to it. But the amount of water that will reach the South Australian towns on the river is still uncertain. All that the residents can do is to be vigilant and prepare as well as they can for the unexpected.

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 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. Those people on the Murray are doing everything that they can do now that will prevent the loss of life and property when the river does flood. 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.

Last weekend Pope Francis paid a short visit to Asti in northern Italy, the place from which his parents migrated to Argentina. He celebrated the Sunday morning Mass in the Cathedral there to celebrate Christ the King.

From these lands, my father set out as an immigrant to Argentina, and to these lands, rendered precious by the rich fruits of the soil and above all by the native industriousness of their people, I have now returned to rediscover and savour my roots. Today too, the Gospel brings us back *to the roots of our faith*. Those roots are planted in the barren soil of Calvary, where Jesus, like the seed that falls to the earth and dies, made hope spring up. Planted in the heart of the earth, he opened the way to heaven; by his death, he gave us eternal life; from the wood of the cross, he brought us the fruits of salvation. Let us then gaze upon him, the Crucified One.

On the cross, we see a single phrase: "This is the King of the Jews" (*Lk 23:38*). That is Jesus' title: he is a king. Yet as we gaze upon him, our idea of a king is turned upside down. Looking at Jesus, we see that he is not comfortably enthroned, but hanging on a gibbet. The God who "casts down the mighty from their thrones" (*Lk 1:52*) appears as a slave executed by those in power. Appareled only with nails and thorns, stripped of

everything yet rich in love, from his throne on the cross he no longer teaches the crowds by his words; he no longer lifts his hands as a teacher. He does more: pointing a finger at no one, he opens his arms to all. That is how he shows himself to be our king: with open arms. Only by entering into his embrace do we understand: we come to realize that God went to this extreme, even to the paradox of the cross, in order to embrace every one of us, no matter how far distant we may be from him: he embraces our death, our pain, our poverty, our weakness. He embraced all of it.

As we begin our Advent journey to prepare for the coming of the one who embraces us all in love, may the hope that Pope Francis speaks about be our special gift.