

**1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent (A)**  
**(Isaiah 2:1-5 / Matthew 24:37-44)**  
**01.12.2013**

This First Sunday of Advent brings back to mind an Advent Sunday of some years ago. We were asked to welcome a group of Parish Readers here to the monastery that day for an afternoon of reflection. I was called upon to give a Talk to this group on the significance of reading the Scriptures in church.

I opened our session together by asking the group a simple question. I asked what each one had retained from the Scripture readings of that day.

In a room of about twenty to thirty people only two persons were actually capable of recalling immediately the word that had spoken to them that particular Sunday.

It was the call we heard at the heart of today's gospel passage: *stay awake*.

The two readers who were immediately able to quote the Scripture verse that had spoken to them were both men of a relatively young age, parents of small children, who had seen their children ushered out of the main body of the church for a para-Liturgy of the Word. These children were later brought back into the celebration around Communion time carrying placards they had made in their Sunday school on which were inscribed two words, the key message of this (and that) First Sunday of Advent: *stay awake!*

The two fathers has retained the message not least because of their loving attention to their children. I find that very significant.

Think about it!

If – as so often happens – we leave church and all too readily forget the Word of God we have heard proclaimed there, might it not be that we are lacking what those two young fathers exhibited in regard to their children? Namely, loving attention!

It is clear that when we love someone, then we will be attentive to that person. We will hold on to the words they speak to us. We will pay heed to whatever they say to us ... not only when the words were first pronounced, but later on as well. We will go back over the important words a loved one has spoken to us long after they were first spoken. These words will sustain us for a long time to come as we continue to savour them.

Do those of us who live in love with someone not remember the first time that person said to us that they loved us and how they said it? Do we not recall the words of comfort someone who has loved us pronounced when we most needed to hear them give us this reassurance? Or again, it may be that we are led to remember a word calling us to order when at some time someone we loved and trusted needed to correct us for something we had done or failed to do.

Frequently I hear people lament the fact that God does not speak to them.

I am thinking, for example, of people who are perhaps seeking to find their way forward in life or who are confronted with an important choice and who are longing for the Lord's guidance in their decision making. I am thinking of those who are going through a critical stage in their career or are at some crucial turning point in the unfolding of their life-story where they feel they just cannot afford to to make an error of judgement.

These people long for a word of direction from the Lord. They would love God to speak to them and tell them what to do. But it appears to them as if the Lord prefers to keep His counsel. He seems to remain silent.

It is not that God is silent! It is not that He refuses to speak! It is that they (we) do not listen and cannot hear!

Fair enough, the Lord will not communicate with us by e-mail or by sending us text messages. By and large, we won't have Joan of Arc experiences and hear voices communicating the Lord's message to us, telling us what to do.

But God is not silent. He speaks. He makes His will known to us.

God makes His will known to us in many ways ... and He does so in one privileged way when He speaks to us through the Sacred Scriptures.

God speaks to us using the inspired words of the Bible.

He speaks to us as we read and meditate upon His word in personal prayer – in what we call *lectio divina*.

And He also speaks to us in a very real and in a most privileged way when we give ear to His word as it is proclaimed for us in the Christian assembly. God speaks when His gather for the celebration of the Liturgy. He speaks to you and to me as we gather here to listen to His word this morning.

The teaching of the Second Vatican Council is clear on this point. In *Sacrosanctum Concilium* – the Vatican II Decree on the Liturgy – we read: *The Lord is present in His Word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in Church. The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that the faithful be instructed by God's Word and be nourished at the Table of the Lord's body.*

This teaching document insists: *When we gather for Eucharist we gather around the Table of the Word and the Table of the Sacrament.*

We often fail to see this. We appreciate that the Lord is present as we gather around the *Table of the Sacrament*, but we fail to appreciate, to the extent that we should, that the Lord is present as we gather around the *Table of the Word*.

As a result, we can fail to treat the Sacred Scriptures proclaimed in the assembly with the respect that we should give to them.

There are a whole host of patristic texts that could be referred to which tell us that we should treat the inspired words of Scriptures with the same respect we reserve for the Sacred Species, the consecrated bread and wine of our Eucharistic celebrations.

Pope Benedict XVI in his Post-Synodal Exhortation on The Word of God, *Verbum Domini*, wrote: *There is a great need for a deeper investigation of the relationship between word and sacrament in the Church's pastoral activity and theological reflection.*

Certainly the Liturgy of the Word is a decisive element in the celebration of the sacraments of the Church.

I wonder do we really appreciate this.

Let me propose a little litmus test.

Do we continue to savour the word of God heard proclaimed in the assembly at Eucharist after we have left the celebration?

Do we make an effort to return to the newness of each Eucharist by appreciating the fresh word which is given to us for each day through the different extracts from the Sacred Scriptures read at each Eucharistic celebration?

The words we read this morning make this Eucharist different to yesterday's; just as the words read tomorrow will make tomorrow's Eucharist different to today's.

Luke's account of the disciples' journey on the way to Emmaus (Cf. Luke 24) enables us to reflect on the link I am drawing to your attention this morning: namely, the link between the word read and explained and the bread broken to be shared.

What the Emmaus gospel account helps us to understand is the profound association – indeed, the unbreakable bond – that exists between the Sacred Scriptures and the Holy Eucharist.

So closely are the two bound that one is as deserving as honour as the other.

In the Church's official presentation of the Eucharist it is said: *The Church honours the word of God and the Eucharistic mystery with the same reverence.*

We must ask if at a personal level we do this.

It seems to me that this is the question we should ask ourselves on this First Sunday of Advent.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church could hardly be any clearer: *The proclamation of God's word at the celebration entails an acknowledgement that Christ Himself is present and that He speaks to us.* If He speaks to us through His word, He surely wants us to recognise Him and reverence His

presence in that word.

St Jerome makes the point strongly that we should venerate both the word and the Eucharistic bread when he says: *For me the gospel is the Body of Christ. Christ's Body and Blood are really the word of Scripture!* St Jerome goes on to say something that should heighten our consciousness: *When we approach the Eucharistic mystery, if a crumb falls to the ground we are troubled. Yet, when we are listening to the word of God and Christ's flesh and blood are being poured into our ears yet we pay no heed, what great peril shall we not feel!*

All this is being drawn out to make one basic point for this morning. It is all being said to echo the exhortation heard in the gospel: ***Stay awake!***

What is required of us is not just to waken up when the consecration bell rings!

Would it be an exaggeration to imagine that because we ring the bells at the beginning of each Eucharistic celebration in this church building, while not ringing them at the specific moment of the consecration, what we are inviting you to do is to stay awake for the whole of the celebration and not just for one privileged moment in the course of the liturgy?

We must strive to stay awake all the way through each celebration of the Eucharist.

***Stay awake!***

*Listen ... So that we may walk in the Lord's path.*

This is the prophet's call addressed to us.

This morning's text from the prophet Isaiah concerns the Torah: the Word of God, the Law, which was proclaimed in the Temple of the Lord.

Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in one of his reflections on the Word of God that the Bread of Life discourse in John's gospel makes an underlying comparison between Moses and Jesus, between the one who spoke to God face to face and the One who makes God's known.

Jesus' discourse on the bread speaks of the gift of God – which is what Moses obtained for his people with the manna in the desert which is really the Torah, the life-giving word of God.

In his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Joseph Ratzinger says: *The Law has become a person. When we encounter Jesus we feed on the living God Himself, so to speak. We truly eat bread from heaven.*

We do this already by listening to God's word attentively in the Liturgy of the Word at each Eucharist, by taking the word to heart and savouring its message.

*Here too we live a Holy Communion!*

Jesus couldn't be any clearer. His wish is that His word find a home in us.

We become God's Temple, His Holy dwelling place, not only by consuming the holy bread we eat, but already to the extent that we welcome and hold God's word in our hearts.

The word of God is also bread from heaven: manna ... It is food for the journey.

Significantly the stone tablets – on which were written the Lord's words of life (the commandments) – and the holy bread He gave them to eat were conserved together in the inner sanctuary.

This too is significant.

I say all this for a very specific reason.

What I dare to propose to all of us for this Advent season is that we make a renewed commitment to give ourselves to an attentive listening to the word of God as it is proclaimed in church. The words of Scripture are given to us as nourishment, a word by which to direct our lives at each and every Eucharist and also in the celebration of the Divine Office.

To be attentive to God's word in our personal prayer in scriptural meditation, what we call *lectio divina*, is very important.

But it is especially as we come together as a community of believers and listen together to the word of God as it is proclaimed in the assembly that we are formed into God's own people.

The alignment of altar and lectern in the central axis of this church building is a reminder to us to hold Christ at the centre in our community life: Christ in His word and in the sacrament of His body and blood.

We heard it said earlier: *Both the Scriptures and the Eucharistic elements are Christ's body and blood.*

For me both the Sacred Scriptures and the Eucharistic elements are *our* life too, for by virtue of our baptism each one of us personally and all of us together are Christ.

If Jesus is present in the word proclaimed and in the bread and wine consecrated, He is also present in all of us, the community we form, together.

Vatican II reminds us of this when it states: *He (Christ) is present when the Church prays and sings ... He who promised, 'where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them'.*

We are not meant to be here this morning as a gathering of strangers who are content just to sit on our seats like passive spectators, deafened, ear plugged onlookers.

We are meant to be here this morning as actively engaged listeners to the Word who will become doers of the Word by putting Christ's words into practice, allowing His teaching to be brought to bear upon our lives.

To do this we must put the message at the heart of today's gospel into practice: we must listen and *stay awake!*

Amen!