

1st Sunday of Advent (B)
(Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1.3-8 / Mark 13:33-37)
29.11.2020

Some ask: When will the Lord come? While it is stated clearly in today's Gospel passage that *we do not know the day or the hour when the Son of Man will appear*, in the short text we heard a very strong emphasis is placed upon the need to *stay awake*. That call is repeated four times in just a few short verses. This leads me to suggest that it seems to be in the night hours that the Lord is most likely to come to us.

That the Lord is wont to come to us in the night is certainly Good News for us to hear this Advent, given that, from so many points of view, things are looking pretty sombre for very many people. We are far from having dealt with the whole impact of the coronavirus; there is the incertitude around Brexit; there is also the endless dispute and squabble taking place in the USA around the transition of government... These are but a few of the matters preoccupying our world – and even menacing many people's welfare. Given this background, we could all do with a renewed glimmer of Christ's light at this terrible hour of darkness in world history. For quite a number of months now many families and communities right across the globe have been enduring protracted pain and loss. All these past months have seen people's hearts overshadowed by nothing less than clouds of distress. All around us there are people held in the grips of fear; riddled with anxiety. Persons of all ages and walks of life are worried; some are scared out of their wits.

The Scriptures' renewed assurance that the Lord is coming to be with us offers us a glimmer of hope. The fact that it is implied that the Lord comes to be with us in the night, rather than being a cause of dismay to us, should actually inspire deep confidence in our hearts.

I know the night hours can be particularly difficult for those who are sick, for those who are suffering pain, for those who are going through grief and loss. The night is often experienced by such people as a period of profound anxiety. Those who suffer from sleeplessness can be preoccupied by all sorts of worries, overcome by a multitude of fears, to the point of feeling nothing less than absolute panic, unbridled distress. In their anxiety they can find it well-nigh impossible to *let go* and fall into that state of slumber which is needed to allow them to get some quality sleep to help them recuperate their energies and renew their strength.

In contrast, when the night hours are well lived they provide for us a graced period in which to repose ourselves – re-*pose* ourselves. In the night hours many are happy to be held in the arms of one who loves and cares for them. The night is a time in which some are blessed to live the grace and beauty of intimate encounter with their loved one – and with that they are given to savour the deep peace that stems from their loving union. This beautiful moment of shared communion leads them to experience nothing short of bliss... and with that comes gentle, re-creative rest. The Bible likes to use the kind of images I have just evoked. We find them in the Psalms, for example. The Psalmist speaks of *falling into a gentle sleep in the arms of one who loves us – like a baby who falls asleep in the arms of its loving parent, knowing that it can guard its heart tranquil, because it is being watched over benevolently*. Saying that, I think of verses of a psalm proposed for entry into the night hours by the liturgical code of the Rule of St Benedict. This psalm has us sing: *I lie down to rest and sleep comes at once*. In words found in yet another psalm, the same religious song-writer has us declare that *while our bodies sleep our hearts keep vigil, waiting on the Lord at all times*. I could give many similar examples of verses from the Psalter which all make the same basic point: namely, that the night can be a positive moment in our lives, a grace-filled space in which to experience that the Lord draws near to us and makes His abiding presence felt

within us. Let me just share one more verse from the Book of Psalms. In psalm 17 we read: *You know my heart, O Lord. You come to me at night...* The psalmist goes on to marvel: *In the night time, Lord, You reveal Your wonderful love and You save me.*

All that to say something I feel it is particularly important for us to hear at the opening of this Advent season, especially given the experience of the year 2020: the importance of waiting expectantly, longingly and hopefully... trusting that better days that will surely come. It seems to me that we are called to hold the aspiration for better days very consciously in our hearts this year. Great attention to each other is required of us at this time, genuine thoughtfulness, real mindfulness, an acute awareness of our responsibility in regard to our own and each other's well-being. I believe it is important that we try to frame the present restrictions which have been put in place (including that which hinders us from gathering for public worship) in this perspective. These are sombre hours. This is a hard time for many. We cannot deny that. But we can, and we should, endeavour to live them in the light of the Lord.

While conscious of the fact that the natural tendency of many people (maybe even most people) is to envisage darkness as an enemy – a time which carries within it possible menace and threats of all kinds, might I put forward the idea that we try to take the circumstances into which we have been plunged this year more positively than that? Let me suggest that we make an effort to see the night we are going through at present as preparing us for a bright new day. Let me suggest that we strive to see the darkness itself as a privileged moment in which the Lord manifests Himself to us. As we remarked at the outset of this reflection, it is hinted in today's Gospel passage that the Lord comes to His people especially in the night. It is for this reason that we are invited to keep vigil.

In a Declaration made some decades ago in a Church Assembly of New Zealander Presbyterians I read a line which stated: *The darkness is our friend.* The phrase struck me when I first read it and I was led to muse on what it might mean. I have found myself holding it in my heart, mulling over it and returning to it at various points upon my own life journey – which, like every life journey has known both dark night times and glorious sunlit days. I recall thinking of what the phrase *The darkness is our friend* one day in I sat in St Peter's Cathedral Geneva, looking up at the inscription of a phrase so dear to Calvin and the Reformers *Post Tenebras Lux (After Darkness Light)*. The statement *The darkness is our friend* must be properly understood – especially when it is used by Christians who are called to be *children of the light and children of the day*. Darkness is not a state to become installed in. The reason why darkness can be considered a friend – even by Christians – is because it prepares us for the day.

When we think of it, some of the most marvellous things that happened in the life of God's People occurred in the heart of night. Those saving events prepared God's People for what we call *the Day of the Lord: the Coming of Christ.*

Let us consider that claim. Re-read the story of God's dealings with His people. Start to enumerate for yourself some of the wonders that were wrought by God in His People's favour in the deep darkness of the night. We are told that it was in the midst of the darkness of the night that the One who is our great light – the person of Jesus Christ – first appeared on earth and made manifest His radiant glory to our world. It was in the dark night of the first Christmas that the Saviour's great light initially shone forth. It was as *shepherds watched their flocks by night* that they were visited by the angels who directed them to the Christ-child. It was precisely the darkness that allowed the Magi to find the star that guided them to where the Christ-child lay.

Let us apply what I have just said there about Christ's coming to the reality of our own lives. In the same way as Christ came into our world passing through the darkness of Mary's womb, so all of us came to birth in this world having first lived in the darkness of our mother's womb. It was in the darkness of the womb to begin with that we were nurtured and protected, prepared to come to birth. It was in that place (a safe place for most of us) that we first grew and were made ready to face up to and enter into the challenges of the light of day.

Just as the Magi needed the darkness of light to discern the star that led them to Christ, so it is only in the darkness that we can see the splendour of the universe. It is only in the night that we can see with our eyes the blankets of stars and the solitary glow of the planets that surround the earth. One has to have had the wonderful experience of the deep darkness, the pitch black of night, in a desert setting – like that of Arizona which is well-known to me – to be able to truly appreciate the splendour of a night sky. Talking of the desert, it should also be pointed out that it is only in the darkness of night that desert dwellers – nomad people – find real respite from the cruel, relentless light of the sun. In the day hours they may find short moments of shade along the way, but, because of the lack of vegetation in their desert setting, it is hard for them to protect themselves from the scorching sun. For this reason, the night will be experienced by desert dwellers, much more than by us, as a welcome moment in which to find relief from the burdens of the heat of day.

Many salutary moments of darkness – literally saving and health-giving moments – are referred to in the Scriptures: not least among them, that of the great saving event of the Exodus. Deliverance was offered to God's People in the night time. On the awesome night of *the Passover* – which is hailed by our elder brothers and sisters in the faith as *the greatest of all nights* – God's Chosen People were led forth into freedom. Think of the many other nights which were and remain so significant for God's People. Consider Jacob's encounter with the Lord in his dream in which he saw communication between heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending. Think too of Jacob's combat with the Lord in the heart of the night, when the patriarch wrestled with a mysterious stranger and managed to overcome him. Who was that figure? God's angel? God Himself? Or, was it with his own self, his shadow side, that Jacob fought that night? Jacob's struggle is one so many of us can identify with. We all wrestle with God on occasion and we all wrestle with ourselves at times. There are many other nights in the Bible in both Old and New Testaments that are worth noting. Think of the night in which Samuel heard God's call. Think of the night when Peter and his companions were freed from the binding chains in that prison cell where they were held captive.

Years ago I noted in my spiritual journal these words first penned by another, because they spoke to me at that time a message of comfort I needed to hear. I return to them this morning and share them with you: *In the blessed desert darkness Mary and Joseph were able to flee with the Infant Jesus to safety in Egypt. The text goes on to say: In the darkness of sleep, we are soothed and restored, healed and renewed. In the darkness of sleep dreams rise up. God spoke to Joseph and to wise men through dreams. God is speaking still.* How true that is! God is speaking still. He is speaking to us at the present time in all we are being led to traverse. If only the ears of our hearts were attuned to listen!

The Scriptures tell us that *the night can be as bright as day* for the Lord's beloved. The night can be a place in which we hear the Lord speak to us most clearly. If it was so for so many great figures in biblical times, so it can be the case for us today.

However paradoxical this may sound, the night can actually be a place in which we are also given to see better – a time in which we get a better perspective on things, because we are led

to see them not in our own light, but in the light which the Lord shines upon them in our darkness. From the darkness – even in the darkness – light resplendent can and will emerge.

I am not going to deny that in the solitude of darkness fears and concerns are wont to arise within us. I have already alluded to this. However, it is important for us to note that in the solitude of darkness our hopes and vision for the future day can also rise and come to the surface.

In the night we can be led into a face to face encounter with ourselves – as Jacob was in that mysterious combat he endured during the night. As a result, in the darkness, a presence of communion, true companionship, both with God and with our true self, can also make itself felt. This is a grace that helps us remain at peace deep within our hearts even as fear rages all around us. It is also a grace that leads us to be in more profound communion with others.

If in the darkness we are sometimes led to wonder if humanity will survive, in the darkness we are also given the sweet assurance that *God is with us*. With that assurance comes trust.

In the night of fear into which so many in our world find themselves plunged at this time of global pandemic, let us pray with confidence of heart: *The Lord is my light and my help, whom shall I fear. The Lord is the stronghold of my life before whom shall I shrink?* In our night times in life, let us cry out in prayer: *Come to us, O Lord. Come to us in Your goodness. Help us not to lose heart. Come to save us. Come to set us free. Come to heal us. Come to strengthen and console us. Come, and with Your coming, herald in the dawn of a bright new day for our world.*

Amen!