

Reflection - The Advent message

By Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, based on a homily given on Advent Sunday 2013



“We celebrate the first Sunday of Advent and once again this year our Sunday celebration, of the Feast of Saint Andrew, patron of this Church, slips into the Advent season.

The Gospel reading we have just heard calls on us to: “Stay awake, because you do not know when the Master is coming”. This is the central message of Advent. Indeed “Stay awake, because you do not know when the Master is coming” is the essential attitude of the Christian at any moment in time and at any moment in his or her life. Christians are called to be alert, to be awake, to be on their marks ready, day after day, to respond to the challenge of their Christian calling.

Pope Francis has struck a remarkable reaction right around the world. The reactions are overwhelmingly positive, even if each of us chooses our favourite theme. Some feel that he is going to turn Church life and doctrine head over heels. Some are happy to see that he is going to reform the Roman Curia and the way the Church is

governed. All are struck by the way he does not just talk about poverty but witnesses to poverty and how he tangibly feels for the poor. But sometimes our reactions miss the central point.

The big temptation for all of us is to think that Pope Francis is talking about others who need to change, while he is really telling all of us that we need to change. He is calling us to wake up and to stay awake and alert. He is calling all of us to renew ourselves and to become a renewed Church. He is unambiguously reminding us that a tired, a timid or a closed inward-looking Church will never reach out to spread the message of Jesus in our world today.

One of the images that Pope Francis often uses is that of the door. He is calling on us to keep the doors of the Church open. He means that literally: closed doors invite no one in. He is using the image of the door also as a symbol: the Church doors must be open in welcome. The Church must be welcoming

especially to those who living in anxiety and hopelessness, to those who are seeking the answers to what life is about. If we dig down a little deeper the Pope is also asking us questions about why so many young people do not find the Church a welcoming Church, while we possess one of the great secrets about the meaning of life which young people are seeking: the message of Jesus Christ and how he reveals that our God is a God of love.

And he takes the image of the Church door one step further. The Church doors must be open so that we go out through them into the world around us to live and witness to the love of God, especially to those who are on the margins of Church life and those who are trapped in the margins of society. There is no point in having our church doors open if we remain happily inside as a closed comfort zone for ourselves and the like minded. There is no point in creating a Church which is locked within itself and within its own history.

The Advent message is that the Christian life is always a future-looking one. The Advent wreath is an image of the Church. Week by week we light another candle as our lives move forward step by step in expectation. Our mission as Christians in the world is, as we look forward to Christ's coming, to anticipate that fullness of Christ's

teaching through the way we live as individuals and as society, and to ensure that our world does not deviate from God's design for his creation.

How does the message of Advent help us focus better on the fundamental thrust we should be giving to our lives? How does Advent help us to witness in our society to what Christ's coming means?

Advent, is a period of waiting, of longing, of anticipation and preparation and of rejoicing that "the Lord is coming", that "the Lord is near"; it encourages us to look to the future as a future of hope and there is no doubt that we need hope today, as individuals, as families, as communities and indeed as a nation.

We should learn to think like the Old Testament prophets as they looked forward to the coming of the Saviour. They were sensitive to the experience of injustice and sin under which they lived and looked forward in hope to the coming of "the anointed one", as one whose coming will bring the newness of peace and justice and righteousness.

It was such a hope that enabled the Prophet Isaiah to dream the dream that we heard of in the first reading, with those beautiful words: "One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again. They shall beat their

swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks”.

Advent reminds us that it is possible to change our world, starting out from where we are concretely within all the ambiguities and compromises of life, and move towards the realisation of the ideal of truth, justice and love.

The Christian of every generation is called particularly to be awake and attentive to where society is slipping into wrong ways and to cry out like the prophet to return to the ways of God. In our days, sadly, nations still raise weaponry against others. In our own city how often do we read about knives being raised in violence and guns in vengeance and lives – young lives – being ruined? Like you, I am horrified to see in our world of progress and enlightenment that men and women and children are driven in their hundreds of thousands from the homes through wars as in Syria. Like you, I am horrified by the news of someone being burned alive in the Phoenix Park in these days. Christians in our society must find the ways to speak up and stand up as witnesses to the God of peace and loving care.

Advent then is a moment in which we should interrupt our daily life and think about what is essential. All too often, we live like those mentioned in the Gospel reading who, at the time of the flood, carried on with their daily activities, important as

they were, asleep to the wider consequences of their way of life.

Following Jesus Christ is a calling to a robust engagement with the challenges of our society. The Christian life is never self-focussed but focussed on self-giving as Jesus gave his life to save us. Christians must learn the ability not just to adapt to the realities of the day but to challenge the realities and the thought-patterns of the day. The Christian must be one who stands out and has the courage to rise above conformity, even when that is not easy.

Advent is not strictly a time of penance and fasting as is Lent. It is marked more rather by a growing sense of joyfulness for the fact that Jesus is coming and that his coming is near. We pray that when he comes he will find us not closed in the comfortable and the familiar, but out there doing God's work and confidently bringing his message of love and hope into the world around us. As we celebrate the Feast of Saint Andrew, we give thanks to God for the work that is achieved in this Parish day by day and we ask God's blessing on the entire parish community.

**Homily notes of Archbishop
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of Advent, Church of Saint
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