

Homily

First Sunday of Advent

28 November 2021

Throughout Advent we reflect on themes of waiting and watching, of living in darkness and waiting for light by which we might see. Some of this is about our relationship to the natural world. In the northern hemisphere, the days are getting shorter and the weather is getting colder. Most of us are looking forward to midwinter when that trend reverses and we begin the journey toward spring's warmth. But these themes are also about our spiritual lives and relationships. We know that our lives, as Christians, are a gradual transformation. We hope always to be moving toward a more perfect union with the will of God, to be more Christlike, and as this happens we often use the image of being able to "see" more clearly. To understand better. To be illuminated.

We intentionally read many prophecies through Advent. We hear from prophets like Isaiah of the hope of their people, waiting for a Messiah who would illuminate more of God's plan for them and the whole world. We believe that these prophecies were fulfilled in the Incarnation, the first coming of Christ to humanity, which we commemorate at Christmas. But we also hear, through Advent, prophecies of Christ's return. The promise of a return to humanity, this time on the Last Day, to judge the living and the dead, and to draw all people into the eternal kingdom of God.

In today's passage from Luke's telling of the Gospel, Jesus speaks of the Last Day that is to come. He tells of the signs that will herald its arrival. In the same way that buds on trees tell of spring, or a lightening of the eastern sky tells of the sunrise, there will be signs that tell of Christ's return. Jesus also assures us that the coming of the kingdom of God in its irresistible fullness is going to be an upsetting experience. Literally. Those systems and structures that we have come to think of as normal and the status quo—all of the "we've always done it this way" things—will be knocked about. They will be held up in new light and we will see them for the good and the ill that they contain.

This is one of the most consistent promises of the prophecies about our relationship to and our interactions with God. That every encounter brings with it an illumination. A new understanding. God's presence is a light that reveals what was once hidden. This idea of revelation is usually surrounded with positive and happy assumptions. The revelation of a new scientific discovery that will benefit humanity, for example. Revelation made its way into English from Latin. We have another word that means the same thing, from Greek, but generally carries a different set of assumptions. The Greek word is "apocalypse." This word usually carries frightening assumptions about great upset and disturbance. It really means "the revealing of what was hidden." The revelation of what was once hidden demands a reconsideration of relationships. Realizing that fossil fuel consumption is impacting the planet's ability to sustain human life demands a change in our relationship to that consumption. A change in our relationship to God's creation and, ultimately, a change in how we understand our relationship to God.

The revelation of God in humanity, the person of Jesus Christ, is the critical moment of change in our relationship to God. It marks the beginning of a new covenant between God and those who

belong to Christ. Jesus speaks throughout scripture of the consequences of the changes that this new relationship with God will bring. Families will be divided, people will leave their homes, there will be conflict. This is what happens when uncomfortable, painful truths are revealed. Truths about the oppression of people. The unjust use of power by those trusted with it or those who have taken it by force, for the sake of greed and pride. Sometimes the revelation of truth doesn't hit us until we hear it in a way that rings true. We need the light shining on just the right spot. Even if we've heard the facts, it doesn't land until we hear them arranged in a particular way.

About five years ago a friend of mine, a woman and an Episcopal priest, was traveling home. She had been visiting family in sub-Saharan Africa and, because of travel itineraries, she and her husband were in a large, Muslim-majority city in North Africa for the Paschal Triduum. They wanted to attend the Great Vigil of Easter and, after extensive asking around, found that there was a Franciscan monastery not too far from their hotel. They stopped by a couple of times but couldn't find notices posted about services and nobody answered when they knocked at the gate. Taking a chance, they went around sundown on Easter Eve and a monk answered their knocking. They explained in a collection of broken English, French, and Spanish, why they were there and were let into the monastery compound.

On the way into the church, they were introduced to the priest presiding at the Vigil. My friend's husband explained, again in broken sentences, that she was an Episcopal priest. The presider was very excited to learn this and disappeared briefly. When he returned, he was carrying an alb, cincture, and stole for her. She was confused, being a woman and an Episcopalian in a Roman Catholic monastery. Surely he couldn't mean for her to vest and participate. He explained that they were the only Christian community for many, many miles and that distinctions which were clear in Europe and North America were rather hazier there. More importantly he had over 40 people to baptize in the liturgy and could use the help.

She vested and sat with the presider in the liturgy. When the time came for baptisms, each of them stood on either side of the font and as one person was being dried off and signed with chrism, the next was being baptized. Nearly fifty baptisms in all, adults and children. My friend was overjoyed at the beauty of the moment, the display of faith in a place where being Christian was not easy or popular, and at the stunning œcumenical practice she had been part of.

In conversation with the rest of the congregation after the liturgy ended, my friend's joy was replaced with fear and worry and sadness. Every one of the people that had been baptized just an hour before was a refugee, fleeing the conflict in Syria. They had made their way this far and, on Easter morning, would be attempting a dangerous, illegal crossing of the Mediterranean, hoping to make their way to Spain's shore. They did not, realistically, expect to live. Their baptisms were their final commitments to God—their final act of hope—while being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.

We had all heard about the conflict in Syria and the refugee crisis for some time but, for many of us, it registered in the way of other conflicts in far-off places. Political unrest, wars, oppressive political regimes, widespread poverty. These are daily news stories from places far, far from

Canada. (We are no strangers to poverty, unrest, and oppression in Canada but we prefer to hear about them as problems other people suffer.) For many of us, the refugee crisis did not become real until we saw the body of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, drowned, lying in the sand on the shore of the Mediterranean. This tragedy—one among thousands in the lives of refugees—was the apocalypse that revealed the truth of the crisis for so many.

The Syrian conflict is perhaps the largest recent contribution to the global refugee crisis, but it is not the only contribution. The thousands of people traveling to and camped at the southern border of the United States are part of this same trouble. Conflict, unrest, natural disasters, and climate change make this a global concern that is growing, not shrinking. Plans for accommodating “climate refugees” are already widely discussed by governments in temperate parts of the world.

Canada has pledged to welcome, shelter, and support thousands of refugees. For a host of reasons we have seen less than half of the promised numbers of people enter and settle in this country. Some causes were unavoidable, like the COVID-19 pandemic. Others are the result of human inefficiency or unwillingness to keep promises made, both in Canada and in other countries where refugees find shelter.

When we hear and see reports of the refugee crisis it is tempting to spare a moment’s sympathy for those in trouble, say a prayer of thanksgiving that it’s not us, think well of the refugee ministry in our parish and across our diocese, and move on to the next news item. It is easy to forget that the faces of those families fleeing to cross a border in hope of safety on the other side are the faces of the Holy Family, chased from their homeland by a fearful and greedy Herod. The same systems of oppression, power-mongering, greed, and corruption that have created the refugee crisis at all of its levels are precisely the same systems about which Jesus and all of the prophets are speaking. They are the same systems that forced Jesus’s childhood to be spent in Egypt and not the homeland of his parents. It is these systems that will be torn down, dismantled, and cast into the burning pile like chaff from the threshing floor as the kingdom of God draws nearer.

You and I in this church today may not be able to persuade the world to solve the refugee crisis. Or, indeed, any of the problems that face us as humanity. But we do have the opportunity to make a difference here. There are refugees in our own city, in our own neighbourhoods, in this parish for whom we can care. Refugees from conflict, from genocide, from poverty, from addiction. People displaced from their homelands by greedy corporations, proud governments, and the gluttony of an unjust economy.

Our calling, when we meet these refugees, is to see them in the new, dawning light of God’s kingdom. To recognize them first not as others, somehow different from us, but as neighbours whom we are called to love. Then, in the light of love to recognize in them the faces of our Lord and his parents, displaced and fleeing from the people and structures that would do them harm. To see them as our siblings, as children of God every bit as beloved as we are, their blessings stolen by human pride and selfishness.

These past years we have had many apocalypses that are quickly revealing much uncomfortable truth to us. The kingdom of God is at hand. It is much closer than we think and its light is revealing many truths that challenge our comfortable assumptions. The gates of the kingdoms of this world open to the rich and the powerful, while the gates of the kingdom of God open widest to the widow, the orphan, the beggar, and the refugee. From where we stand, we can see both gates and the people hoping to pass through them.

This Advent, as we wait and watch and the sky lightens in the east, we are called to begin a journey toward one of those kingdoms. The journey is long and difficult and it does not seem sensible until it is seen in the light of God's revelation. It is the journey that we have committed to taking together and the road that Christ has promised to walk with us, carrying the light of the world.

Blessings of a holy Advent to each of you.