

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the beginning of Advent, which in our Christian Calendar marks the beginning of the Church's year. We begin by looking forward to the coming of Christ who is born in Bethlehem and at the same time we look forward to the Second Coming of Christ at the end of time.

Today I want to focus on the second of those two events. Our gospel reading this morning - our first in Advent - begins with an ending: the end of time. Jesus describes an apocalyptic time of suffering and darkness into which "the Son of Man will come with great power and glory." "The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven," he says. When will that time be? Only the Father in heaven knows.

I think that most of us will struggle to imagine such an event occurring within our life times. Or maybe you can imagine it? The thought is not meant to make us depressed, but to make us think. Jesus has promised to return - that's good news. God has always kept his promises. How then should we prepare for the second coming of Jesus? This is where it gets interesting. Jesus doesn't tell us to stop what we are doing. He doesn't tell us to drop everything, join a cult and huddle together on an island with others to wait for the end of time. What he tells us to do is to keep awake. In the short passage we heard this morning, he says: keep alert; be on the watch; keep awake; keep awake.

If we are to translate this into our daily lives, Jesus is telling us not to grow slack or lazy in our Christian life and practice. Being alert means to keep saying the words of Scripture, to hear the words and let them sink in, to accept that until Jesus returns, your journey continues and that there is more work to do to get ready. Keep awake and be watchful.

Keeping awake is also part and parcel of holding on to that urgency, that sense of the "now", which is characteristic of the gospel of Mark. It means being faithful in worship and prayer and listening to what God is saying to us. To keep alert, to keep awake, was a characteristic of the prophets of old. By keeping alert they were attuned to what God was saying to them. They could read the signs of the times through the gift of God's spirit: the spirit of truth which shines like a light through the darkness of the world with all of its lies and deceit. "Keep awake" is therefore a prophetic call.

Along with keeping awake, there is a second thing we need to do before Jesus returns. It's obvious: we must wait. We are waiting for the coming of Jesus. The people of Israel knew that waiting was part of their history as a nation. They waited for God to free them from slavery in Egypt. They waited for God to return them from exile. They waited for God to send them a Messiah. Throughout history, people have prayed to God and waited for God to release them from bondage and tribulation.

Being people of faith, we wait patiently. St Frances de Sales said "True waiting means waiting without anxiety". We will be judged by the quality of our waiting. If we have confidence in God, we wait without fear or anxiety because ultimately we know that all things are in his hands.

It seems as though we have been waiting for a long time: 2,000 years in fact. Why is he taking so long? I hear God's voice in my ear - be patient. The spiritual writer Thomas a Kempis wrote that "All men commend patience, although few are willing to practice it." Being patient and watchful is our recommended spiritual practice throughout the season of Advent

I want to end this homily by returning to our main theme, which is the coming of the Lord. I would like to add another vitally important factor to our waiting and watchfulness. I said earlier that there are two "comings" of the Lord: the first, in the stable at Bethlehem, and the second coming of Jesus at the end of time. Now I want you to think about the third coming of Jesus: this occurs when we open our hearts to receive him.

This third coming takes place between the first and the second. We open our hearts to Jesus and draw close to him. We become personally involved with him as he is with us. What this means is that you want the story and person of Jesus - his birth, life, death and resurrection - to become part of your own story. It means taking one step further, and then another and then another, in your faith journey. It begins when Jesus stops being more than a historical figure you listen to and either agree with or disagree. It starts when you say, "Jesus is Lord over all the earth...and over me as well." To do this, you simply have to say the words, "I want you, Jesus, in my heart." Because when Jesus enters in here [points to heart] and stays here, you are giving him permission to transform your life from the inside out.

When Jesus is in our heart our waiting is no longer waiting but something more dynamic, personal and ultimately fulfilling. The heart can teach us so much and the heart which has Jesus at its center can teach us so much more. You can't learn these lessons from books, or from watching television programs about Jesus. You can't learn his message of love fully without opening the door of your heart and asking him to enter. We say that Jesus is love, so therefore when you are inviting love into your own heart you are welcoming the King of love into your life. And your own heart will, like John the Baptist in the womb, leap for joy when love approaches.

So the act of waiting and being watchful is no longer something to be endured. It can take on a whole new aspect - it can be a creative and expanding experience. Because of our confidence in the King of love the darkening of the skies at the end of time will not trouble us. True love drives out fear. The changes and challenges of your life can all be faced when you have Jesus in your heart. That's the hidden message of our Advent story - in our waiting we welcome Jesus like a long lost brother, and rejoice because he draws out from us things we never knew we had, actions we never thought we could do, love we never thought we could have or express.

Keep awake. Be watchful. Let love reign in your heart. The King of love is coming. Let us welcome him.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford