

Advent 1B

Psalm 130 says: 'As the watchman waits for sunrise, I am waiting for the Lord'. The role of the watchman is frequently mentioned in Scripture. He is the one who foregoes sleep so as to prevent enemies invading under cover of darkness.

Watchfulness and heartfelt prayer puts us in the spiritual frame of mind most appropriate for Advent. Jesus says: 'Be on your guard and stay awake, you do not know the hour when the Son of Man is coming'. We don't want to be like those foolish bridesmaids who were asleep when the Bridegroom arrived.

Even as committed Christians, if we are not watchful and alert, we can so easily be lulled into a kind of spiritual complacency which provides ideal conditions for a subtle assault by the Evil One. Our enemy will be delighted to entice us into a cosy routine of worship which has little or no bearing on our everyday lives.

The secular run up to Christmas which coincides with Advent is more taken up with a worldly wakening than a spiritual one. I'm told that in some cities people queued all night for their black Friday purchases. People were even fighting in the aisles. It's so easy to get caught up at this time of the year in the consumerist merry-go-round that we easily lose sight of the true meaning of Christmas. The wake-up call of Advent is a summons to experience the transforming power of Jesus in those areas of our lives which rob us of inner peace.

The Feast of Christmas is uniquely a celebration of Peace. On the First Christmas night the shepherds were woken from their slumber by the heavenly hosts of angels chanting: 'glory to God in the highest heaven and peace to men and women of goodwill'. This Advent may we be awakened to the peace of Christ which only He can give.

In the First Reading it says: "*we were all like men unclean, all that integrity of ours like filthy clothing*". There is a tendency today for people to make compromises on many moral issues and feel fine about it. But this kind of 'integrity' is like filthy clothing. Advent is the time to put compromises aside and wrap ourselves in the new clothing of God's undiluted truth. But worldly concerns, heightened in the run up to Christmas, may dull our senses in this regard.

Delia Smith, the original cookery goddess, in her book 'a feast for Advent' puts it poignantly:

'It was about 11.30 on Christmas Eve a few years ago. I had arrived at my local church to celebrate the first Mass of Christmas at midnight as usual. But as I sat there I simply had to face up to the fact that my tired, aching body was in no fit state to celebrate anything. How incongruous that in order to celebrate the second greatest Feast in the Christian calendar I had become so ensnared in the trap of what the world makes of Christmas that I was miserable - not at all joyful. I had done my worldly best wrapping presents, posting cards, preparing food, not a thing missed. But at that moment of self-revelation I realised I was simply too exhausted to celebrate this, the greatest birth in the history of mankind'.

This was a moment of awakening for her. We too can learn from it.