

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 the way we live.

The secular run up to Christmas which coincides with Advent is more taken up with a worldly wake-up call than a spiritual one. I'm told that this year in some cities people actually queued all night for their black Friday purchases. People were even fighting each other in the aisles. It's so easy to get infected, particularly at this time of the year, with the consumerist bug 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.

But peace will only come with this spiritual awakening. On the First Christmas night the shepherds were woken from their slumber by the heavenly hosts of angles 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 and women unclean, all that integrity of ours like filthy clothing"*. Advent is the time to divest ourselves of the filthy clothing of compromising the truth of the gospel with flawed secular ideologies. And then by wrapping ourselves in the cloak of humility we wake up to the truth about ourselves. 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. It can be for us too.