

ADVENT REFLECTION

There are three personalities associated with Advent – well four if you include Jesus – one in the O.T., - Isaiah – remember he was the one who wrote the most about the coming Messiah. Then you have John the Baptist who prepared the people for the imminent coming of Christ and then you have Mary. Her ‘yes’ to the Angel meant she conceived and carried in her womb the Word made flesh, God made Man who was born on Christmas Morning.

According to the First Reading today the ushering in of the Kingdom will bring with it an end to war and conflict. Since many places in the world are not at peace as we speak it is quite obvious that the words of Isaiah which were written hundreds of years before Christ have patently not yet been fulfilled – are we even half way. So we have to keep working and praying for it. He’s not only talking here about an end to military conflict (they will hammer their swords into ploughshares and their spears in sickles etc) but an end to other forms of turmoil and unrest. The turmoil in Ireland associated with the debt crisis – well they seem to be going from one crisis to another. A year ago or so it was the clerical scandals and the industrial schools, then before that it was the long drawn out N.I. conflict which is still rumbling. Having said all that, on the paper not very long ago, Ireland was rated as the fifth most desirable place to live in the world. Out of conflict, of course, can come hope and healing.

The coming of the kingdom, may take place secretly and slowly but never painlessly. It’s like the baby in the womb; it grows slowly but surely and if you ask any mother they’ll tell you the pain of childbirth is soon forgotten when the newborn arrives. Joy is the result. No wonder one of the Sundays of Advent is known as ‘gaudete’. (pink candle is lit). Mary said she was filled with joy when she entrusted her life and destiny into God’s hands. She said to the Angel Gabriel: “I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me.

So Advent is a time of the year when we ask God to give us faith like Mary's and to entrust our life and destiny into His hands – we entrust our joys and sorrows, our ups and downs our successes and failures. I allow Jesus to be the Lord of my life, my past, my present and future, Lord of my time and lord of my treasures, lord of my heart. Is it my past which is bothering me. If I have confessed big sins in the past, I must let go of them. When our Lord forgives our sins, he dumps them in the deepest lake and a big sign is erected at the spot which says 'no fishing'. I make Jesus Lord of my past.

When we talk about the coming Kingdom, when we pray for it in the 'our Father', we're not referring to a territory but it is more aptly described as 'the reign of God'. Some of you will remember one of the more popular hymns of the 1980's – 'our God reigns'. We were singing it all the time. The question is: have I allowed Him to reign over every aspect of my life or does he get a look in at all? Delia Smith once described in her book 'a feast for Advent' as 'a journey away from self and towards deeper union with God'. How far am I along that road?

The serpent (who represents the Devil) in the Garden of Eden tempted Adam and Eve to dethrone God and set themselves up in His place. In fact that is the root of all our sins. He tried the same trick on Jesus in the Desert by offering him all the kingdoms of the world but Jesus sent him packing. He said to Adam and Eve: "if you unseat God, by revolting, then you can take His place and without reference to Him decide yourselves what is good and evil. Are the physicians not playing God in the area of stem cell research or in vitro fertilization? While they see these things a step forward, the Church sees it as a step backward away from God. At the beginning of this talk we spoke about war and conflict in the world which is the antithesis of God's kingdom, The reason for this is that man, instead of God wants to be in charge of things down here. Remember once when Peter tried to soft soap Jesus by urging him to bypass the Cross and his Father's will - Jesus said: "the way

you think, Peter is man's way not God's". If God and his Church say something is wrong and I say it's not wrong, guess who's right.

So Advent can be a grace-filled time when I call 'time' on my arrogance. There is nothing which disarms the Devil more than humility. But in a godless world it is often seen as weakness.

John the Baptist who appears from nowhere on the Second Sunday of Advent is an icon of humility. He said "the man who is coming after me ranks before me and I'm not fit to untie his sandal strap – "he must increase, and I must decrease" – how self-effacing can you be. I think one of the reasons why clerical scandal wasn't addressed in the past is because clergy were too busy jockeying for the best parishes which is far cry from the transparency and unpretentiousness of John the Baptist. When I began my ministry in Sheffield as a mere curate, I don't ever remember the PP at the time saying to me "you, Fr Paddy, must increase, I must decrease – actually quite the opposite – with a curate his ego expanded all the more. In my view this is also one of the reasons for a dearth in vocations – a poor gospel witness was given.

Christmas, which advent prepares us for, is the feast of the humility of God Himself. The celebrated carol 'come to the manger' puts it beautifully: "he leaves all his glory behind to be born and die for mankind".

John the Baptist spells it out "every valley will be filled in" Is there and emptiness in my life that I'm trying to fill in by pampering myself with material acquisitions which conflicts with what the psalmist says: 'in God alone is my soul at rest'.

'Every mountain laid low' – is there a mountain of pride in my life which needs flattening. Am I always right in everything? It was well known that the Parish priests of old used to say to his curate: "even when I'm wrong, I'm still right as far as you are

concerned". Well, so much for humility and John the Baptist.

'Make a straight highway for our God'. How did the nursery rhyme go: 'there was a crooked man who walked a crooked mile'? Am I crooked or, as my father used to say, 'a 'contrary' person. If so, there is no better time than Advent for straightening things out in this area.

So let's not fritter away the four weeks of Advent this year. Don't put God to the test by bemoaning the hollowness of Christmas if I failed to take Advent seriously, or when my mind was more taken up with "the number of shopping days to Christmas" than grace and prayer filled days with an inventory of my life thrown in for good measure followed by private confession and gospel reflection. Christ can be reborn at a deeper level in my life this Christmas if I let him. There, he can be allowed reign over every aspect of my life.