

1st SUNDAY OF ADVENT YEAR B HOMILY 2020

STAY AWAKE AND FIND OPPORTUNITIES TO SERVE HERE AND NOW

Mk 13.33-37

3Is 63.16-64.8

1Cor 1.3-9

Well, after over 8 months of closure, from the weekend of 21st March, the 4th Sunday of Lent, welcome back to our real presence to each other as a friendly faith community. I recall that first weekend without Mass, wondering what to do next on Saturday evening and Sunday morning, then getting back into action with regular virtual weekday and weekend Masses put onto the parish website ever since. My young Canadian friend Joe even sent me a tripod with light halo and iPhone holder for videoing via Amazon from Edmonton Alberta, to help with my projection, so thanks go to Joe!

So let's be thankful we're back in one piece, healthy, hopeful and relieved, looking forward to a coronavirus free future, but with caution, as we know that it still lurks out there as a threat to public and therefore your and my health. Hence the ongoing physical distancing and masking indoors. So let's continue to be careful.

Here we are with Christmas coming fast, as we celebrate together the first weekend of Advent. And it's also an ongoing welcome to those who join us via the parish website from near and far.

The continuity from the week before last week's Gospel is obvious, in the way Jesus is portrayed as telling us to stay awake and be prepared for whatever comes, as we don't know what tomorrow brings. One approach is to live for today is to say: *'Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die'*, or perhaps less ominously, the fatalistic approach: *'Who knows what tomorrow will bring?!'* We could never have even remotely guessed what 2020 would bring.

A literal interpretation is of no help, and the suggestion is that Mark, and Matthew earlier, are reflecting on Jesus' words coming true in the attempt of that nasty Roman emperor Caligula attempting to put his statue placed in the Jerusalem Temple in 40 AD, or the Roman destruction of that temple in reaction to the Jewish revolt of 68-70 AD. Such traumatic and tragic events to the Jewish mind were catastrophic and indicative of the end coming. In the Gospels, also, this is Jesus' last warning before his own Passion and Death. Early Christians also seem to have both feared and anticipated Jesus coming back on the next cloud, within the time of the first generation of Christians. Well, there have been more than a few generations since then (about 81, in fact) over the last 2000+ years, so we wouldn't want to hold our breaths waiting, would we?!

To my mind, the primary message is to get into action now, and not be a procrastinator, waiting for tomorrow to come, and hoping things won't be too bad! In fact, the Gospel call of Jesus is to active response here and now, not just passively keeping out of trouble and anxiously awaiting the unknown or the end! The facts of life are about facing our own mortality, with a determination to make a difference in the meantime. So what to do about that?

During the week, our friend Bill Attard emailed me a reflection of Pope Francis, titled ***"A Crisis Reveals What Is In Our Hearts"***. (*Bill told me 'Forget Your Advent homilies'! suggesting Trump and others should take note too!*) Jorge Bergoglio, as a young seminarian of 21, in 1957, faced his own mortality with a near fatal respiratory illness, where he lost a lobe of one lung, saying *"For months, I didn't know who I was or whether I would live or die."* He gives credit to the doctors, but the nurses in particular, who provided him with appropriate medical care and pain relief, such that he, as we can readily see now, survived and thrived! He translates his memories of this traumatic experience, which changed the way he saw life, his own and that of others, into the present global coronavirus scenario, coming through intense pain, anxiety and uncertainty.

I quote him: *"In this past year of change, my mind and heart have overflowed with people. People I think of and pray for, and sometimes cry with, people with names and faces, people who died without saying goodbye to those they loved, families in difficulty, even going hungry, because there's no work. Sometimes when you think globally. You can be paralyzed."* He goes on to reflect on the ongoing misunderstanding between peoples, civil wars, suffering and need in our conflicted, but interconnected world.

On he goes: *“This theme of helping others has stayed with me these past months. In lockdown, I’ve often gone in prayer to those who sought all means to save the lives of others. So many of the nurses, doctors and caregivers paid that price of love, together with priests, religious and ordinary people whose vocations were service.*

To sum up, the sub-heading is *“To come out of this pandemic better than we went in, we must let ourselves be touched by others’ pain... We have to recover the knowledge that as a people we have a shared destination. The pandemic has reminded us that no-one is saved alone.. Solidarity is more than acts of generosity, important as they are; it is the call to embrace the reality that we are bound by bonds of reciprocity. On this solid foundation, we can build a better, different, human future.”*

Yet, I see positive signs. Incoming US president, practising Catholic, Joe Biden in his victory speech, offered hope for all Americans to get a fairer go, to find common ground and mutual good will, for healing of divisions, and pointed to the need for all to build a better world, not just focussed on nationalistic, tribal, racial and religious or otherwise distinctions. What a relief to hear a common sense and coherent message of good will from the top, after a nightmare period of division, incitement to hatred, undermining of human decency and respect for each other, and straight out lies. There is no such thing as alternative truth. Facts are facts, science is knowledge, and, whilst it is obviously legitimate to have diverse opinions, there are some principles which are undeniable, such as our common humanity, human dignity, the need to work for peace, to conserve our resources, and to protect our precious planet, of which we humans are an integral part, with a responsibility to preserve it for future generations.

Advent is a reminder of that responsibility, to face tomorrow with a determination to make it better by the way we act today and prepare the way of the future, with a focus on what is truly important, and not just on what is going to be good for me, me, or even just my family, and maybe those with whom I feel most comfortable.

Yes, there are always going to be trials and tribulations and disasters here and there in our own lives, and on our planet in general, but there are things we can do to make things better and deal with adversity, as Pope Francis points out.

As we prepare the way of the Lord this Advent, the stark reminder is there that we shouldn’t be like small-brained turkeys (*pardoned or not, like Corn and Cob at American Thanksgiving!*), beaks agape looking up at the sky, hoping for rain, but unable or unwilling to look around at where the needs are, and the action should be, in responding to this Gospel of service, in which we purport to believe.

john hannon

29th November 2020