

First Sunday of Advent

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

One of the watchwords issued by the government in the early stages of the pandemic was: *stay alert*. The Jesus of the synoptic gospels was not acknowledged as a source, but those very words occur in the parables and teachings he shared with his disciples toward the end of his public ministry. And this too is the watchword of the Church in the season of Advent. *Advenire* = to come, and this word has given the season its name. It is the second coming of the Lord, his glorious return as Lord and judge at the close of the age that is focused on by the selection of scripture readings the Church puts before us up until 16 December. Having assimilated all the messages the scripture gives us (the prophets are our companions in this season) and the Lord's own warnings as the clouds gathered over his own earthly life, we can then start preparing for our annual commemoration of his first coming among us on the first Christmas Day. We can then, as of 16 December, legitimately and with the Church's blessing, look forward to the coming of Christmas.

Many of us use that phrase "looking forward" frequently in our daily conversation and it has certainly come up in every phone call, socially distanced greeting across the street, or zoom conference since the lockdown began. We are looking forward to the scientific community finding an effective vaccine (a future promise became a present reality in the past week, thank God), we are looking forward to seeing family at Christmas (three household bubbles of six, a promise soon to be realised), we are looking forward to going abroad on our holidays again, we are looking forward to the end of the pandemic. All of this is perfectly legitimate and understandable, in just the same way as we look forward with spiritual longing during Advent. But it is important to remember that the only thing we actually know is *the present*. It is worth reflecting what good we can actually discover in the here and now, and above all what difference we can make to others and ourselves in the *hic et nunc*. Such an impulse is not foreign even to the eager anticipation which is in the air in Advent.

The Lord has come with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord will return as judge at the end of time, but the risen Lord is at the heart of his Church every day and he makes himself continually present to us. We meet him in our local parish community itself, we hear him in his Word, we are nourished by the Eucharist and we can meet him also in our private prayer, particularly if it is inspired by our perusal of the scriptures. Not only that, we can make him present in the here and now to others: *I was sick and in prison and you visited me, I was naked and you clothed me, etc.* And we know that any act of kindness, especially to someone in need, makes Christ present to them. It is worth remembering this way in which Christ is present, albeit under the radar, every day, in Advent and every other season.

Father Patrick