

1st Sunday Advent B (Mark 13:33-37)

Here it is, the First Sunday of Advent. And Christmas shopping begins. The stores downtown and the shopping malls will be crowded. People will be rushing around buying gifts for all those they feel an obligation to remember. Time is of the essence. But what kind of time? As we check our Rolexes, or more likely, our Timexes and Seikos, we become aware that time marches on relentlessly. This is the kind of time the Greeks called **chronos** time, tick tock time, the kind of time we wear on our wrists or in our pockets. There is another kind of time, however. This the Greeks called **kairos** time. We can't buy a watch that can tell this kind of time. This is the kind of time in which we are open to new things happening, to new awarenesses, to new receptiveness to God's grace, to new ways of God's coming into our lives.

"Be watchful! Be alert! Watch therefore, you do not know when the Lord of the house is coming," as Jesus said to his disciples. Being watchful and alert is what Advent is all about. Advent is a period of reflection and examination; of a new awareness of our own giftedness by God; of how we treat ourselves, made in God's image and likeness; and of how we treat each other, also made in God's image and likeness. Do we abuse ourselves and diminish ourselves and are we people of ingratitude? Do we diminish others, wives, husbands, children, friends, not holding them in respect and love and treating them as we would treat ourselves?

St. Ignatius of Loyola in his "Spiritual Exercises," counsels us to daily periods of self-reflection and awareness. He calls this daily prayerful exercise, an **examination of consciousness**. He speaks of the five points in this self examination: The first point is to look over the events of your day, asking the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to help you see where you need to be thankful, for whatever blessing may surface in your awareness in this period of quiet reflection. Gratitude, of course, is a very valuable attitude, and in my experience, people who are habitually grateful are usually the happiest people I have met. The second point is to ask the Holy Spirit for light, for illumination, for what the Spirit wants us to see in this examination of our consciousness. The third point is to ask God to show you where he has been present in your life, either in you or in others, and what he has been asking of you. Reflect on your feelings and moods, urges and movements, and see how God may be drawing you. St. Ignatius stresses how God is present in the ordinary events of our daily life, and our task is to discover God's presence. The fourth point is to seek forgiveness from God for the moments you didn't respond to his love. The fifth point is to ask for help and guidance for tomorrow, perhaps a prayer to overcome something, to persevere, to become more sensitive to God's activity in your life, to let go of what may keep you trapped, to love more, to have a conversion in some area of your life, to be less fearful, or less prejudiced, to become more tolerant, more patient with yourself or others, more affirming, and more open to listening to others. Perhaps to ask for an increasing trust in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Be watchful, be alert, the Lord is coming.

Al Grosskopf, S.J.

2nd Sunday Advent B (Mark 1:18))

Most of us have attended a presentation of Handel's *MESSIAH*. or at least we've heard a recording. Do you remember the opening lines of the first tenor solo? It's drawn from our text today from the book of Isaiah. In fact, like many of the famous sections of that oratorio, we can't even read the text without hearing the lyrical lines of that musical setting. "A voice cries out; in the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God." "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people shall see it together."

Isaiah speaks of a desert and wasteland. How can one describe a wasteland? It can be dry and empty and tedious. A personal wasteland can be boring, listless, hopeless, joyless, stifling and despairing. What is our wasteland like? What are the things that get in the way of the highway being made straight for our God, and our joyful and hopeful expectation of the liberating coming of Jesus into our wasteland. Our's may be a wasteland of greed and selfishness and fear, in our marriages, our relationships, our friendships, our business. Perhaps we may squander our talents and resources by not sharing them with others in need. Our wasteland may be addictions to alcohol or drugs, or abusive behavior to others and to ourselves. And fear may keep us trapped in our wasteland.

Our Gospel tells us of the wild man in the desert, John the Baptizer, the messenger sent preparing the way, making straight the path with a message for the liberation from our wasteland and from whatever may keep us trapped in this joyless, hopeless place. John speaks of repentance, a metanoia, a conversion of heart, acknowledging the truth in humility, seeing ourselves as we really are, becoming aware of our messed up lives and turning to the Lord Jesus for forgiveness. And messed up as we are, Jesus never gives up on us. And the truth sets us free, and in freedom and liberation we live in joy and hopefulness. The road becomes straight and we are no longer trapped in our wasteland, for Jesus has come to set us free because he loves us with a passion. His perfect love casts out the fear that keeps us trapped and hopeless. And for this we gather to give thanks.

Al Grosskopf, S.J.

3rd Sunday Advent B (John 1: 6-28)

Hillaire Belloc, the famous English Catholic author, said one time, referring to the joy he found as a Catholic, "Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine, there you'll find laughter and good red wine; at least I've always found it so. Benedicamus Domino!" I think there's some truth to Belloc's observation. Catholics are for the most part pretty happy and joyful people, for we have much to be happy and joyful about.

St. Paul tells us in our second reading to "Rejoice always, never cease praying, render constant thanks." And in our first reading from Isaiah we are presented with some of the reasons that prompt our rejoicing as believers. On this *Gaudete Sunday* we are in joyful anticipation of the coming once again into our lives the anointed one. He is the one who comes bringing glad tidings to the lowly, the one who comes to heal the brokenhearted, the spirited one who proclaims liberty to captives and release to prisoners, the one who announces that we are indeed vindicated by our loving God. And this is cause for our hearty rejoicing, for God is indeed the joy of our souls.

To us who are lonely and brokenhearted, Jesus, the healer comes to make whole again and to liberate us from the prisons of our inadequacies, self-hatred, and narrow unforgiving spirit. He comes to open up a new world of possibilities in how we experience his Father's unconditional love for us. He comes to tell us how loveable we really are, each one of us. He tells us not to stifle our spirit, but to let it soar beyond pettiness and resentment and to let the love of God penetrate our entire selves, body, soul, and spirit. The healing Jesus tells us that that the evil spirit of despondency and hopelessness has no prison bars other than the ones we forge ourselves, and that in the liberation that comes to us in Jesus, we are free to be ourselves just as the Father has made us.

In the freedom and healing that our brother Jesus brings us as pure, unearned gift, our spirits can soar in hope and in joy. But so often, the free acceptance of Jesus' liberation and healing can be so hard, or rather, we can make it hard. So often our pride gets in the way and we keep our expectations of Jesus' gifts so low. The key to our acceptance of what Jesus freely offers is simply letting go of our low expectations, giving up control of our lives to him, and turning things over to him in faith and trust. Only then can we become free and healed people, and with St. Paul, can rejoice always.

St. Ignatius Loyola is famous for a special prayer of giving up control. We Jesuits call it the "Suscipe," which means "Take and Receive." It goes like this: *"Take Lord and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, my entire will. You have given me all that I am and all that I possess. I surrender it all to you so that you may dispose of it according to your will. Give me only your love and your grace. With these I will be rich enough and will have nothing more to desire."* Paradoxically, in giving over control and freedom to our loving God, we become truly free. In this freedom lies the source of our joy. For the great gift of the Lord Jesus in our lives, we gather to give thanks as he asked us to do in this Eucharist. We remember him and his profound act of love in laying down his life for us, and in his rising again to new life. Let us allow ourselves to die to ourselves and to rise with him to new life. Let us rejoice with him. Amen.

Al Grosskopf, S.J.

4th Sunday Advent B (Luke 1:26-31)

Do you remember when you were a little kid, sitting in a classroom with about forty other little kids? And Sister asked a challenging question, presenting a problem for the class to solve? She was looking for someone to volunteer the correct answer. The confident academic stars raised their hands immediately. Others in the class developed a sudden interest in their desks- heads down, eyes down, and hands down. Finally Sister chose a little boy in the back of the room. His hand wasn't raised. But the wise teacher knew that this shy little kid knew the correct response. He just needed confidence. She knew there was more in the boy than he knew. Her job was to bring it out. So she overlooked the eager hands in her face to find the diamond in the rough. She was right. With the correct answer, a new academic star was born.

It's wonderful to be chosen; to have the chance to fulfill your destiny. It's great just to be discovered, to have someone believe in you. That's why we love stories of unlikely heroes, discovered out of obscurity and raised to the stage of their greatness. We enjoy knowing that someone, somewhere, found their true calling- or rather that their true calling found them.

Today's Gospel is just this kind of story. Here is a maiden, Mary, living a normal life in obscurity. She is a peasant girl from the dumpy, backwater town of Nazareth. The Bible doesn't indicate that she is remarkable in any particular way. No distinguishing features make her stand out of the crowd of other young girls living routine lives at the edge of poverty in a land that was utterly unremarkable on the political scene of the Roman Empire. If it was up to us, we probably would have overlooked Mary. But not God.

What is this God like? God likes small, intimate places. In our first reading from 2 Samuel, God asks, "Should you build me a house to dwell in?" "I have been with you wherever you went." God pitched his tent among them. God chooses to stay close to his people. When he came to us in the flesh, Mary, the poor peasant girl became God's dwelling place. Perhaps the lesson for us is that God can come to us too, in the small dwelling place of our hearts, we who are lowly and unworthy. The price for God's coming to our hearts is saying Mary's "Let it be done to me," and we surrender part of ourselves. The paradox of Christianity is that the prelude to fullness is emptiness. He must increase and I must decrease. Only then can God's love fill us and then overflow in superabundance. And the price we pay, as Mary paid, is surrendering to the God we trust as warm, affectionate, intimate, benign and involved in our lives. God is the one who loves us with a passion and who believes in each one of us and who calls us to become more than we are. And for God's gift of Jesus in our lives, we give thanks.

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