

1st Sunday of Advent

Homily based on Is. 63: 16b -17, 19b; 64: 2-7; 1 Cor. 1: 3-9 Mk. 13:33-37

“Awake and be ready to meet Jesus Christ with joy now and for always.”

We often hear about hurricanes that Sometimes hit badly in different parts of our country. Suppose if the Weather Channel would inform us that there would be a hurricane that will hit our place next week, we would surely take all the necessary precautions immediately, right?! One warning is enough for us to do something to prepare for the calamity. When we buy groceries, we always look for warning signs on the label: cholesterol, fats, MSG, and sodium and sugar contents. We take these warnings seriously.

More than 2000 years ago, Jesus told us that He will come back, and He gave us the warning to be on guard at all times. But His warning goes unheeded. In the Gospel today, Jesus repeats this warning: “Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come!” (Mk 13:33). We may not be able to see the Last Day in our lifetime. But one thing is certain: we will all die and face God in judgment.

This Sunday we begin the Season of Advent. It is a season in which we prepare for the celebration of Christmas, the coming of Jesus in history. We look back at that event in Bethlehem, the beginning of our redemption. It is a season of looking back. But Advent is also a season of looking forward. It looks forward to the second coming of Christ at the end of time. This is what we profess in our Creed: “He will come again to judge the living and the dead.” So, Jesus warns us this Sunday to be always awake, ready and on guard, for we cannot know when it will come.

How do we prepare? How do we become alert? In the Gospel, Jesus used the image of a master leaving the house and entrusting everything to the care of the servants. “He leaves home, and places his servants in charge, each with his work and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch.” (Mk 13:35). In other words, the best preparation is to do our tasks and fulfill our obligations faithfully, not in the future, but now, for we do not know the exact time. And Jesus gives this warning: “May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping.” (Mk 13:36).

There was a security guard of a nearby bank who died. He was on night duty. According to the investigation, he had “bangungot” or nightmare. In other words, it was most likely that he died while sleeping. Clearly, then, he was sleeping while on duty. I am sure nobody wants to hire a sleeping guard.

You know about Charles Lindberg. He crossed the Atlantic Ocean on a solo and nonstop flight in 1927 from New York to Paris in 33 hours and 30 minutes. To get himself ready for the ordeal, he often refused to go to sleep for several nights. When asked why, he replied, “Just practicing to stay awake all night.” This is the attitude that the season of Advent would like us to have.

There is nothing wrong with sleeping. Everybody needs to sleep. It is a legitimate human need. Yet there are times when we need to keep awake in order to fulfill our duties. Sometimes we forget sleeping altogether to finish a job. And most importantly, we have to sacrifice some sleeping time to be with the Lord in prayer. It was the earnest appeal of Jesus to His followers while in Gethsemane: “When he returned to his disciples he found them asleep. He said to Peter, ‘So you could not keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak’” (Mt 26:40-41).

It is said that “Yesterday is a memory. Tomorrow is but a dream. Now is the only time on which eternity depends.” Our future eternal destiny depends totally on the now, on how we make use of the opportunities of the present time. The faithful servants, who were doing their job when the master returns, will surely receive a reward. But the servants who were found asleep and not doing their duties will be punished.

In what does our preparation consist of? The first is self-examination. What is our present condition? The prophet Isaiah in the first reading helps us find the right words: “We have all become like something unclean, all our just deeds are like polluted rags; We have all withered like leaves, and our crimes carry us away like the wind.” (Is 64:5).

After acknowledging our sinfulness, the next step is to make a firm resolution to turn a new leaf. That is why the liturgical color of the Advent Season is violet, a symbol of penance and repentance. Once and for all we decide to reject sin totally and definitively, and follow Christ more closely. And that decision is now. As Thomas Merton said, now should be “the beginning of the end in us of all that is not Christ.” Definitely, the sacrament of Confession is in order during this season of Advent.

And finally, we turn to God and ask for divine assistance in our struggle to remain with Him all the time. Herein lies the importance of spending a little more time in prayer: “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.” St. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, gives us the firm assurance: “I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, that in him you were enriched in every way, with all discourse and all knowledge, as the

testimony to Christ was confirmed among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will keep you firm to the end, irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus [Christ]. (1Cor 1:4-8).

Let us make this year's Advent season truly fruitful. Let us prepare for Christmas. But let us have sincere and serious preparation for that inevitable moment when we will come to face God at the end of time or at the end of our life in this world. May He find us awake, alert and ready to meet Him with joy now and for always. Amen!