

Dear friends,

There was a good spirit at both All Saints and St. Michael's for the feast of "Christ the King" where we sung our last Glorias until Midnight Mass. We ate our first Christmas dinner of the season at the "Solo's lunch", the monthly dinner provided for people living on their own. Now one turns one attention to Advent which morphs into Christmas very quickly because Christmas day is on a Monday, therefore Sunday 24th December is both Advent four (liturgically speaking) in the morning and Midnight Mass in the evening of the same day.

Everything is condensed this month making it a very busy time in church. There is an evening service every Sunday in December as well as some afternoon services. It all gets off to a flying start this coming Sunday when we stage our very popular Advent service of Carols and readings at 6pm in St. Peter's church.

The Advent wreath.

I trust all the churches are now dusting off their Advent wreaths where every Sunday we light a candle symbolizing some aspect of salvation history. There are different schemes for what they represent on which Sunday (Which sometimes causes confusion for some of our retired priests who may be used to using another system) but the one I use and will be promoting because it fits much better with the Sunday readings is this,

Advent Sunday: The Patriarchs

Advent 2: The prophets

Advent 3: John the Baptist

Advent 4: The Virgin Mary (Christmas eve morning)

Christmas eve/Day: The Christ

Sunday 3rd December – Advent Sunday

I will be presiding at both services at St. Peter's this morning and also at the Advent service of readings and Carols at 6pm. Rev. Christ Cant will be presiding at All Saints at 9.30am and John Archibald will be presiding at St. Michael's at 11am. This is the start of the church year so this is the time when we enter year B in our cycle of readings where the bulk of the gospel readings will be taken (where possible) from Mark's gospel.

Isaiah 64: 1-9. A passage that expresses frustration and hope in almost equal measure that does capture the essence of the Advent season. In context, Isaiah was expressing the hope and possibilities of being released from captivity in Babylon might result in the re-building of the Jerusalem Temple but the mood of the people didn't seem to promise much progress on that front and Isaiah also expresses hope of a massive intervention by God which also seems far away. Looking forward with hope of a massive intervention of God and frustration of seemingly very slow progress and annoyance at the disinterest of a sinful and irreligious people captures the mood.

1 Corinthians 1: 3-9. One description of the Corinthian church is that they were "over converted". They had arrived and nothing could be added to them, something that Paul challenges throughout his letter. He reminds them that the "Day of the Lord" lies in the future not the past and their role, along with every other Christian was to wait. Also, the first two verses (omitted in our lectionary) express Paul's theology of "Calling". Not reserved for Christian leaders or "professionals" but every believer is "called" and the Corinthians are (as we all are) called into community where what affects the whole community outweighs all concerns of individuals or small groups of people within the community.

Mark 13: 24-37. Advent Sunday is the beginning of the church year and we start with anticipating the coming of the son of man at the end of the world! Mark, like Matthew and Luke (and Paul) believed that Christ would come soon, during the lifetime of some of the contemporaries of Jesus (as it says in verse 30). This is why the community is warned to "Keep awake!" for the end is nigh. Lots of controversy then because the apocalypse plainly did not happen within their lifetimes but that is not the whole truth. Although the Parousia will be unmistakable, no one – not even Jesus – knows when that will be. Only the Father knows. While we as modern Christians usually anticipate some spiritual existence in the spiritual domain (heaven), we need to remind ourselves that early Christians expected a very physical new heaven and a new earth which they would inhabit in their resurrected bodies. A case can be made that Mark's gospel can best be understood by reading chapter 13 first.

Thought for Today

Some Christians can find it very disconcerting to find out that they don't believe exactly the same things as the first generation of Christians but to me that is just a case of the Holy Spirit "leading us into all truth" as it says in John's gospel (16: 13). The first generation of Christians believed that the end of the world was imminent and would happen within their lifetimes as

stated in our reading from Mark's gospel this week. They believed it because that is what Jesus said and that is what they thought he meant. They also believed that the whole universe would be destroyed and replaced with a new heaven and a new earth and they would live in this new world in their newly acquired resurrection bodies.

What do modern Christians believe? Well, there is a wide range of beliefs apparent in every congregation. Some in the early church doubted resurrection itself – a belief that Paul encountered and combatted – and I'm sure those same doubts are alive today. Some believe in the "rapture" when Jesus will appear in the sky and we will float away in the air to join those already dead (1 Thessalonians). Some believe, like St. Paul, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 15:50) and that we will be given "spiritual bodies". This aligns most closely with my beliefs most aptly summarized by Paul himself when he admits that it is all a mystery (1 Cor.15: 51) but that God is faithful and true and because of the resurrection of Christ our future life, free from pain and suffering is sure. We have hope in this very good outcome for us and for the world because of the revelation that God is Love, revealed to us in Jesus Christ. I admit that we cannot know everything – sometimes only small fragments of truth reveal themselves to us. We see as through a glass darkly quoting Paul again (1 Cor. 13: 12) and rely on God's love and good intentions to be there for us in our hour of need. God is good. God is love and has a beautiful future in store for us. This is the Christian hope, despite not knowing the mechanics of how and when.

The Prayer for Today is the Catholic prayer known as the "Hail Mary".

**Hail Mary, full of Grace
The Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst women
And Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners,
Now and at the hour of our death
Amen**

Love and peace,
Martin