

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Gospel: Matthew 24:37-44

Jesus said to his disciples, "For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at a least expected hour."

REFLECTION 1:

BÍ ULLAMH – BE READY!

One day while filing away papers, the secretary of President John F. Kennedy found this note written in the President's own hand. It read: 'I know there is a God and I see a storm coming. If he has a place for me, I believe that I am ready.' Jesus' warning to be ready and Kennedy's readiness to serve invite us to ask: How ready are we to put ourselves at God's service for whatever God may ask us to do? As Isaiah the prophet put it, 'I heard the Lord say, 'whom shall I send?' I answered 'I will go, send me!' (Isaiah 6:8).

Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day on the Sunday nearest to the 30th November, the Feast of St. Andrew. The word 'advent' means 'coming' or 'arrival'. It's about keeping watch as the preface puts it, 'we who watch for that day'. The focus of the entire season is the celebration of the birth of Jesus the Christ in his First Advent, and looking forward to his return as King in his Second Advent. In this double focus on past and future, Advent also symbolises the spiritual journey of every individual and every community in the here and now. We affirm that Christ has come, that he is present in the world today, and that he will come again in power.

The four Sundays of Advent symbolise the four centuries of waiting between the prophet Malachi and the birth of Christ. Advent stresses the importance of the human ancestors of Jesus, the patriarchs and the prophets as demonstrated by the key positioning of St Matthew's genealogy read at Masses on the 17th December.

In spite of all kinds of predictions, allegedly from the sayings of the saints and other holy people, no one knows the time of the Second Coming, only God, and that it will come upon men and women with the suddenness of a rain storm out of a blue sky. They tell us that that time will come with shattering suddenness on those who are immersed in material things. In the Genesis story, Noah prepared himself in the calm weather before the flood and when it did come he was ready. But the rest of humanity was lost in the 'eating and drinking and merryming' and were caught completely unawares and so were swept away. These verses are a warning to us never to become so immersed in time that we forget eternity, that there is a God and that the issues of life and death are in his hands, and that whenever his call comes, at morning, at midday or evening, it must find us ready. God has kept the ultimate knowledge of his Son's coming to himself and his wisdom, so all life must be a constant preparation for that coming. To live without watchfulness invites disaster. Thieves do not send a letter or a text saying when they are going to burgle a house. The principle weapon in their undertakings is the element of surprise. So the household

must maintain a constant guard. However we must remember that the watching of the Christian for the coming of Christ is not that of terror-stricken fear or shivering apprehension, rather it is the eager expectation for the coming of glory and joy. The spirit that leads to disaster is the spirit that says there is plenty of time to put things right before the Master returns. Our earnest hope is that when Jesus Christ does come he will find us employed in doing our duty, however simple that duty may be. On the day that he comes there will be great joy. We could say with the late President Kennedy, 'If he has a place for me, I believe that I am ready'.

REFLECTION 2:

TIME – GOD'S GIFT

There was a time in the mid-1940s when the Irish Ministry of Defence encouraged people to build air raid shelters. Hitler's armies were rampaging through Europe and the fear was that a neutral Ireland could be on his menu. At the time, I was on a visit to my Uncle Paddy in Limerick City, and, quick off the mark he had a shelter constructed in his garden. As an 8-year-old, I was fascinated. This shelter, hand dug with spade and shovel was 14 feet long and 8 feet in diameter. It had an electric generator, an air filter system and five bunks for the family. My mother didn't believe that her brother and family would ever need such a survival shelter. It was the same in Noah's time. Everyone kept on doing what he or she always did. Only Noah and those in the Ark escaped when the rains came. As we enter this Advent time of preparation and waiting, our faith prepares us, and our faith will save us.

In his fine commentary on St Matthew's Gospel, William Barclay cited a fable about three apprentice demons that were being sent to Earth to complete their apprenticeships. Before they departed, Satan asked each of them how they were going to tempt and ruin humankind. 'I will tell them there is no God', said the first. Satan responded, 'That will not delude them, for they know there is a God'. The second demon said, "I will tell them there is no hell". To that Satan said, 'You will deceive no one, for they know there is a hell for the unrepentant'. The third demon said, 'I will tell them there is no hurry'. Pleased with this response Satan said 'Go! You will ruin them by the millions'. Most dangerous of all delusions is to think that there is plenty of time. One of the most perilous days in a person's life is when he or she learns that there is a tomorrow. From that day, the person begins to put off what can and should be done today.

This fable underscores the urgency of preparing for the Son of Man. The images in today's Gospel (Matthew: 24: 37-44) warn that when that day comes it will come with shattering suddenness and with swift judgement that sifts good from evil with a finality that cannot be reversed. Some will survive the hour of the Son while others will not. That decision lies completely within God's choosing, we believers are simply to follow Jesus' advice and 'be prepared' - be prepared today.

Perhaps the secret of being prepared lies in taking time each day to search out the presence of Jesus. He lives and breathes in the word that proclaims and reveals him. He reaches out to feed the hungry with the bread of his word and the bread of his very self. This familiarity with his sacramental presence should lead us to recognise his presence in the poor and needy of this world. Although Jesus has said that these poor will always be with us, he has warned us that our time to see his face in theirs, and to minister to them will come to an end. So, to prepare for an hour we do not know and do not expect, let us use this day, this moment, this time as best we can. Jesus in the Gospels did not advocate doing anything out of the ordinary, other than performing one's daily tasks, 'farming, and grinding' in such a manner as to be ever ready to welcome the hour of Jesus' Advent.