

Sunday Homily

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

28 NOVEMBER 2021

YEAR C

“When you see these things taking place,
you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

Luke 21:31

Illustration

Some time ago there was a series of television adverts for an insurance company. They portrayed a series of domestic catastrophes, and they all ended with the slogan, “We won’t make a drama out of a crisis.” So there was the harassed mother coming downstairs to find the washing machine flooding the kitchen floor. The man contemplating the remains of his car, crushed under a fallen tree. The family returning home to find the window smashed and the television and video gone. All they had to do, however, was to phone the insurance company, and the problem would instantly be sorted out. Because, “We won’t make a drama out of a crisis.”

Gospel Teaching

But making a drama out of a crisis is precisely what the Gospel writers do in the sections of their Gospels we read in Advent. So what is the crisis, and how does the drama help?

The words of today’s Gospel reading are put into the mouth of Jesus, but they are being reported by Luke to a later audience. The first Christians had high hopes for the world after their experience of Jesus. They had seen his resurrection from the dead, and they fully expected him to return in power to judge the world very soon. However, his return did not appear to be coming soon enough to save them from trouble. They were living in a context that was doubly hostile to them, firstly because they were Jews, and secondly because they were Christians. So if they weren’t in trouble with the Romans for being Jews, they were in trouble with the Jews for being Christians. Not long after the time of Jesus they had seen the Jerusalem Temple destroyed by the Romans. Their lives were precarious.

So there is a crisis for early Christianity. The Lord has not returned, and there is no predicting when he will come. Meanwhile, there is danger and persecution for his followers. These two factors contribute to a crisis of faith. Were they right to believe what Jesus said, when his promises do not seem to be fulfilled? Were they right in their assessment of who Jesus was, when he does not seem to have the power to save them from danger?

The Gospel writers take this crisis and make a drama out of it. Luke's drama involves signs in the sun, moon and stars, crashing waves, the powers of the heavens shaken and people quaking with fear. Jesus will return, Luke promises, in truly dramatic fashion. The troubles his followers are experiencing now are nothing compared to the upheaval that will herald his arrival.

What this drama does is to take fear and turn it into hope. Persecution and difficulty are no longer signs of Jesus' absence, but rather of his imminent arrival. The drama is there to energise Christians, to encourage them to hold fast to hope and to live as if every moment was the one when the Lord would return. The crisis for faith becomes a drama of expectation.

Application

Two thousand years have passed, and the Lord has still not returned. And if many of us are honest, we have mostly stopped believing that he will. In our context of faith and thought, Advent can be an embarrassment, with its language of heavenly darkness and shaking earth, and its promises that Jesus will return within the lifetime of the first believers. Many no longer take Luke's drama literally, so far down the ages.

But it is still important. The overall message which Luke and the other Gospel writers want to convey to their readers is echoed by St Paul, and it is this: live each day as if it were to be the day of the Lord's return. We are given Advent as a solemn season in which to examine our lives in the light of Christ's coming, to ask ourselves, if Jesus did return today, what would he find me doing? What would he think of my choices and my priorities? These are questions Christians may ask themselves all the time, but the drama of Advent sharpens them and gives them urgency. Much time may have passed since the first Christians looked to the heavens expecting to see Jesus returning, but the call of St Paul is still addressed to us: "it is now the moment to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers."