

Advent 1

Last week Fr. Constantino, Fr. MacMillan and I attended the fall archdiocesan convocation for priests. Cardinal O'Malley was there and spoke a few words at its conclusion. He told the story of a wedding he once had at which the bride appeared in tears. The bridegroom was stuck in a snowstorm in distant Buffalo, NY. The bride told the then Father O'Malley, "Father, just tell the people to go to the reception." So no wedding, just the reception. Over time, the Cardinal noted, this experience has become for him a kind of parable describing our present day society's experience of the Christmas season: the trees are lighted, the carols are sung, and gifts are exchanged, but the bridegroom, Christ the Lord, the Christmas child, is absent, tucked away somewhere in a distant snow storm.

Do we share the Cardinal's view? So often we hear people call for the return of the Christ child. "Put Christ back into Christmas!" they cry. No more greetings like "Happy Holidays!" No, Merry Christmas. And they are of course on solid ground historically. For this holiday came into existence in order to celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus. It began as a Holy Day in the Catholic Church. Thus there is no reason for this holiday except the fact that it was

first a Holy Day celebrating the Lord's birth. And we who are Christians can and do celebrate it as such. With each other we say Merry Christmas, not Happy Holidays.

But in our society which is now so religiously diversified, could we not see this secularization of Christmas as a holiday in a more positive way? Could we not see our willingness to say Happy Holidays to a person wearing a yarmulke or a woman obviously dressed in Muslim fashion as an expression of our good will towards them, a willingness on our part to include them in the beautiful customs of the Christmas season, while at the same time recognizing that they have their own forms of faith? We are happy that they can share Christmas cheer and goodwill with us even if they do not share our Christian faith. And out of the corner of our mind we might also recall the fact that at the beginning of our country the Puritans did not celebrate Christmas because they saw the celebration of holy days as a non-biblical corruption of the Gospel. Thank God, they lost that battle and the ancient Catholic traditions prevailed. But now we are living that tradition in a different context.

While acknowledging that different context, let us go back to our roots and ask what we are doing as Christians in Advent. Advent

celebrates our belief that this world, our world and its history, is not cyclical but linear. The world as we know it had a beginning and will have an end. Given this linear understanding of our world, it should come as no surprise to us that the world changes. Change is of the essence of a world which is moving from one point to another. And we who are conscious can and should recognize the changes that are taking place in our world, for only then can we respond reasonably to our current situation. The changes come in two different but related forms. There are changes in nature, in our world of wind and water and air and planets and galaxies, in our physical universe, and there are changes which we humans create through our relationships with each other.

However, for us who are believers, our first human relationship is with the Creator who started this whole process and will bring it to its fulfillment. And for us who are Christians this means that we recognize this creator as a Father who loved us and loved us so much that he created the human race and then became part of it in Jesus of Nazareth. And that last fact has made all the difference. Once Jesus is there, the bond between the creator and creation is indissoluble. It cannot be undone. God has committed Himself permanently to his creation and to its human inhabitants. And God did so freely. It was not forced upon him. So it is an act of love.

We owe it to Jewish faith that we can see God in this way. The Jews understood God as their father who acted with and for them in their national history. And so we read from Isaiah today: “You, Lord, are our father, our redeemer you are named forever.” God is our father, our redeemer. And Paul tells us today: “I give thanks to my God for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, that in him you were enriched in every way.” Enriched in him in every way.

God is our father who has enriched us in every way in Christ Jesus. But Jesus who was born, died and rose again will return to us, we are told, in a final and total revelation of himself to us which will have two forms: the form it will take at our individual deaths, and the form it will take at the end of the world’s history

Because we do not know when our individual final day and that of the world will come, the Lord admonishes us to live life wide-awake, looking to the signs of the time to find out where we are and what we should be doing to respond to reality. And that is our Gospel message for this first Sunday of Advent: “Be watchful, be alert. You do not know when the time will come.” What time? Our individual time, and the time of our world.

We are living alert lives if we attempt to live the Lord's law of love in our individual lives and as a church in history. Thank God, we can see our pope attempting to do so. He has brought the Lord's message of love to Buddhists and Muslims and his fellow Catholics living in Myanmar and Bangladesh this past week. As you know, he was told not to identify the Muslim minority, the Rohingyas, by name, while he was in Myanmar, a Buddhist country which does not recognize them as part of their country and has killed them or forced 600,000 of them to flee to Bangladesh. As the guest of the Myanmar government he did not do so. But once in Bangladesh he did: "The presence of God today is also called Rohingya," he said. Then he asked forgiveness in the name of all, in the name of those who have persecuted them, who have done them harm, and above of for the indifference of the world. So we see our pope in the Muslim country of Bangladesh attempting to help a Muslim minority in the Buddhist country Myanmar.

We may save our Christmas greeting for other Christians, but the love of God made known to us in Jesus knows no national or ethnic boundaries. It is universal, but it is especially focused on those who need it most, those like the Rohingyas in western Myanmar tortured, killed or forced into exile, and neglected by the rest of the world. Like a good parent our Father is especially

concerned about the children who suffer most. So too was the Lord Jesus. And so we must be if we are to live alert lives, as the Lord Jesus tells us to do, if we are to be waiting and ready for him when he comes again.