

## **FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT-2020**

**Advent: Preparing for the light and hope of Christmas**

**READINGS: Isaiah 63.16-17, 64.1, 3-8;**

**Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 80;**

**1 Corinthians 1.3-9;**

**Gospel of Mark 13.33-37**

Over the past few months we have heard about what scientists are describing as good news for the research, development and the production of a COVID-19 vaccine. It has been reported that the results for the tests of efficacy and safety of the vaccine are promising. However, despite this good news, we have been informed that it may take a while before the vaccine becomes available to the public. We should therefore not be complacent but to continue to be vigilant, careful at all times and to observe the recommended precautions about social distancing, wearing of masks and sanitizing our hands to protect ourselves and help keep others safe against the spread of COVID-19. With the recent lockdown for Toronto, we have been reminded to continue to protect each other against the spread of the virus while we are also waiting in anticipation for the availability of the vaccine in the future.

Today we begin a new liturgical year, Year B of the Church's calendar as we celebrate the First Sunday of Advent. Today's readings invite us to reflect on the spiritual significance of being vigilant and alert at all times. We begin our reflection with the Gospel passage from Mark. The passage begins with Jesus telling his disciples, "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come". What prompted Jesus to make this statement to his disciples? The passage comes after Jesus' conversation with his disciples about his coming at the end of time. Jesus foretold about the events that would occur at the end of time, such as the destruction of the temple and the persecution of his followers. The disciples wanted to know when these events would happen. In response, Jesus used today's parable to warn the disciples to be ready at all times because nobody knew when the end time would come. In fact Jesus used the expression "keep awake", three times in the passage to emphasize his message of warning to his disciples. Jesus used the image of a master who had gone away and his servants didn't know exactly when the master would return home.

The uncertainty of the coming of Jesus at the end of the ages is a theme in the second reading, from the first Letter of Paul to the Corinthians. In the Letter, Paul gave thanks to God for the working of his grace in the community of believers. Paul and the early Christians believed that the coming of Jesus was imminent. As Paul rejoiced with the early Christians for the new life in Christ, he exhorted them to continue to be faithful to God so as to be ready for "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ". The expression, "the day of our Lord" means the Second Coming of Jesus. In this Letter Paul was urging the Corinthians to be awake and vigilant at all times.

The theme of expectation of the coming of God in the Gospel passage and in the second reading brings us to the First Reading from the Book of the prophet Isaiah. The Book of Isaiah contains the work of three prophets who lived in the different times in the history of Israel. Today's passage is from the prophet referred to as the "Third Isaiah" who gave this prophecy when the Israelites had returned from exile. Their return was very difficult: the temple had been destroyed, Jerusalem was in ruins and they felt that God had abandoned them. Isaiah pleaded to God to come and save his people from their sins. He wrote, "For you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us up to our sins". The prophet prayed to God to come back to his people. Isaiah's message brought hope to the returned Israelites as they waited for the coming of God to save them.

My brothers and sisters, we usually see Advent as the time for us to prepare to celebrate Christmas. However, today's readings tell us that there is much more to Advent than our simple wish towards Christmas Day. So how do we prepare so as to be vigilant and awake for the coming of the Lord? Due to Advent's penitential nature, traditionally we embark on Advent "discipline" in which we are accustomed to focusing on our preparation to celebrate Christmas. But, Advent is also our time of preparation for the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the ages. The twofold nature of Advent means that we need to take into consideration how we live so as to prepare for Christmas and we also need to be mindful of the teaching of Jesus, "to keep alert for you do not know when the master of the house will come" (Mark 13,33-37). The spirituality of the two comings of Christ calls us to embrace holiness.

How do we start on the path to growth in holiness at all times? We can begin with the examination of our on-going relationship with God and neighbour. We can also reflect on the many ways in which we can transform our ways to become closer to God and neighbour. The beginning of a new Church year and the beginning of Advent gives us an opportunity to make a new beginning. Looking back over the past Church year- where are the areas in our spiritual lives that we might have done better or we would rather like to improve on? Today the Church invites us to enter into the new Church year on our journey of faith in Advent.

We might be wondering how we are going to celebrate Advent with the reported increasing numbers of infections in the province and in the country and the recent lockdown. In fact in our parish, activities that we associate with the celebration of Advent such as the daily celebration of the Eucharist, the Advent Bazaar and Advent Retreat are cancelled. Yet as Christians we are encouraged to prepare our hearts as we journey through Advent to celebrate Christmas.

Our call to be vigilant and alert as we journey through Advent can be compared to our call to continue to be vigilant and alert as we wait for the coming of the COVID-19 vaccine. Before the vaccine becomes available, it is our responsibility to help keep each other safe in a meaningful way. Despite the recent lockdown due to COVID-19, we can still be creative in our spiritual exercises so that the celebration of Advent may be meaningful to us. The season of Advent invites us to make some commitments to improve on our spiritual lives. We can start to pray often; to reflect on Scripture readings for the day's Mass; to be patient and to learn to reach out to those in need through our support to the parishes' outreach programs. In our current climate, gestures like keeping ourselves and others safe, showing concern for the other and showing gratitude to

those who care for us are all activities based on our faith. These are all activities that bring us closer to God and to each other and help us grow in charity.

An important spiritual event in Advent is the lighting of the Advent Candles on the Advent wreath. Let us reflect on how the candles that symbolize the light of Christ are lighting the path of our Advent journey to Christmas. At the end of our Advent journey the beautiful Christmas trees with bright lights that we see around us will also remind us about God shining his light of love, peace, joy and hope in our communities of faith. Have a spirit-filled Advent Season.

**Fr. Yaw Acheampong**

(Please note: this homily is prepared for the community at a distance).