

Keeping Vigil - An Advent Reflection

***The glory of the Lord will shine on you
Like the sun God will rise over you
God's glory will appear in your midst
The prophet Isaiah***



This has been a year in which every person on the planet has been called to hold on to hope. As we have faced the unknown, the uncertain and the frightening, we have been called to keep before us that vision of something greater, wider, deeper, beyond the present moment's trials. We have been called to watch and to wait. And so, with that in our hearts, we come to that great season of hope, of watching and waiting - Advent.

To keep vigil means to wait and watch. When we keep vigil, we gather our scattered energies and we become present in watchful attention. Silence and prayer are the marks of a vigil, as are candles. The light symbolizes hope and promise. In our Church Year we are about to enter this time of waiting and watching. Next week is the first week of the season of Advent – the four weeks leading to Christmas. There is something absolutely beautiful and utterly profound about Advent: words and images of light, hope, promise, waiting and longing, such as those of Isaiah, above. There is gentleness, beauty and tenderness in the images and music of Advent. It really is a holy season when everything, the liturgy, Scripture, all speak of a Reality both beyond and within what is known, a Reality that will break upon us like the coming of dawn, as Zechariah says in his beautiful prayer in Luke's

Gospel. Everything points towards the coming of the One whose story we know will touch us. But we are not there yet. We prepare our hearts and minds. There is the anticipation of the Feast to come. The readings we hear during these weeks are all dripping with these rich images. These beautiful words of promise from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, speak of the abundance of life, peace, richness and joy:

*Let the wilderness and the dry lands exult;
Let the wasteland rejoice and bloom;
Let it bring forth flowers like the jonquil;
Let it rejoice and sing for joy.
Strengthen all weary hands,
Steady all trembling knees and say to all faint hearts,
Courage, do not be afraid
Look, your God is coming.*

There is something about Advent which turns our gaze 'upwards' and outwards, into a context greater than we are and in which we find ourselves. We are invited into a real sense of the glory and mystery of the universe we live in. It is a time to ponder and treasure. The prayer of the Church at this time too is filled with this:

*Lord, our God, Your glory breaks on the world.
We are filled with the new light
by the coming of your Word among us.
Lord, make us turn to you.
Let us see your face and we shall be renewed.
Open our hearts to receive this life.
Increase our vision with the rising of dawn
that our lives may be filled with his glory and peace.
Make us a people of this light.
Make us faithful to your Word
that we may bring your life to the waiting world.
(From the Liturgy of the Hours)*

One of the traditions of this time is the singing or reciting of the 'Great O Antiphons' on the last seven days before Christmas. These antiphons are part of Vespers, the evening prayer of the Church (the Liturgy of the Hours). Each antiphon is a name of Christ and an attribute of Christ which are found in Scripture: *O Wisdom, O Lord, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, O Dayspring, O King of the nations, O Emmanuel*. These names and attributes cover a magnificent sweep of our religious story and understanding of Jesus: from the Hebrew Wisdom tradition of naming God's activity in the world as Wisdom and identifying Jesus as that Wisdom, to the genealogy of Jesus, placing him firmly in the line of the great Hebrew king, David. And then there is the highly symbolic and poetic Dayspring or the Rising Sun,

and the clear naming of him as Emmanuel, God-with-us. The Jewish Tradition refers to God as 'Lord', and when this name is given to Jesus it is a powerful statement of who he is.

Reflecting on these names invites us to see Jesus not only as the man who lived two thousand years ago in a particular place and time, but most profoundly, they offer us a vision of who he is – the Christ. The Franciscan spiritual writer, Richard Rohr, says: “Much of Christianity has made Jesus Christ into a denominational savior figure while others have looked upon his saving grace as limited to a few who meet strict qualifications. But what about creation as a whole? How far back and forward in time does the Christ figure extend, and who exactly is Christ”?

Well, we only have to look into our Christian Scriptures to answer this question. When we do, we find a marvellous understanding. In the Prologue of John’s Gospel, we read: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being ... and the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:1 – 3 and 14). Christian Scripture makes Jesus’ place in the history of the universe counted in billions of years and beyond. In Paul’s letters to the Colossians and Ephesians, in what are known as the Pauline hymns, we find this too: “He is the image of the invisible God – all things have been created through him and for him ... He himself is before all things” (Colossians 1: 15 – 17). And John, in his first letter, talks about the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us in Jesus (1John 1: 1- 2).



Our cosmos is unimaginably vast and ancient and, mindful of this, reading these Scripture texts is really exciting! The Jesus whose birth we prepare for during Advent and celebrate at Christmas, the Jesus whose life we participate in and which lifts us up and makes us whole, is the eternal Christ.

Well, what does that say to us about our world? Rohr says: “The real trump card of Christianity is not just that we believe in God. The mystery we are about is much more than that: it’s that the material and the spiritual coexist. It’s the mystery of the Incarnation”. It is the understanding that the great eternal God became human at a point in history and in a place in the world, but it is also the understanding that the entire material universe is an expression of this great God. And as Christians, we believe it is the Jesus story that reveals this. “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by a son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being. And he sustains all things by his powerful word” (Hebrews 1: 1 – 3).

So let us enter this Advent vigil and embrace it with joy. We wait with the longing and watchfulness of the Jewish people who longed for the coming of the Messiah. We wait in hope, and we watch and long for the peace, joy, justice and light that the Messiah brings into our world and into our hearts. As we wait, we look for signs of God’s Presence in our world and in ourselves. Whenever we see goodness, love, justice, good-will, peace, we see God’s Presence. Whenever we overcome our own self-interest and reach out in love, we see signs of God’s Presence. Advent is a comforting, hope-filled and yet challenging time too. The promise is: All shall be well. The Light shines in spite of the darkness.

Whatever the darkness of our need or pain or sadness might be, Advent reminds us that we are not alone, we are not left in darkness. As the prophet Isaiah said so long ago, “The glory of the Lord will shine on you, Like the sun God will rise over you, God’s glory will appear in your midst”. This ‘glory of the Lord’ may be in a gentle assurance, in hope, in peace and comfort in spite of pain, in forgiveness or reconciliation, in kindness and generosity, and in countless ways that we are healed and held.

Advent is not a time to be hurried. A truly spiritual and religious perspective on life will always be mindful of ‘the fullness of time’, a time that is not of our own making. While retailers frantically engage in a countdown, reminding us of how many shopping days are left before Christmas and urging haste in the buying and spending, Advent’s invitation is to another pace, the pace of grace, the pace of God’s time. We are invited to enter this and to watch and wait, to keep vigil over our hearts.

During these weeks, try to take some time each day for yourself, find a quiet place, still your body and mind, and simply watch and wait. Light an Advent candle and remember the promise that marks this holy time: the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

May the peace and joy of our Lord and of this holy time enfold you and fill you.

The Lord, your God is in your midst; God will rejoice over you with gladness, God will renew you in God's love; God will exult over you with loud singing, as on a day of festival.
(Zephaniah 3:17)



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