

## First Sunday of Advent



***“But as for that day or hour, nobody knows it...Be watchful! Stay Awake! You do not know when the time will come...And what I say to you, I say to all: ‘Stay awake!’”***

Mark 13, 33-37

The liturgical season of Advent was designed for the northern hemisphere. It revolves around the natural phenomenon of the days leading up to the winter solstice (21<sup>st</sup> December) getting shorter. The people of pre-Christian times were afraid that the encroaching darkness would eventually swallow up the sun and envelop the whole earth. There were rituals to mark the solstice as people hoped that darkness would not win and that the sun would eventually regain its strength. Christians adapted the rituals and celebrations associated with the winter solstice and substituted the Son of God for the natural sun. They named the season “Advent”, a word that literally means coming or arrival, and included in it the weeks immediately leading up to the winter solstice. So Advent became a time of watching and waiting for the coming of Jesus, the Son of God and the Light of the world. For those of us who live in the Antipodes, “Christmas in July” (even though it’s a commercial invention) resonates better with the darkness, light and waiting symbolism of Advent, than Christmas in December does.

The potential value of waiting is, I suspect, all too often lost on us, because we live in a society that expects instant satisfaction. Instead of seeing delays and waiting times as opportunities to reflect, we get anxious about the deadlines we have set for ourselves and the appointments we have made. We worry about what we’re missing out on and fail to capitalize on the waiting that has been thrust upon us. Waiting in a doctor’s surgery or in an airport terminal more often seems to lead to anger and frustration than it does to calming and satisfying reflection. While Advent challenges us, even by its very name, to reflect on the coming of the Lord at the end of time, at the time of our own death, and at the celebration of Jesus’ birth at Christmas, it is also a challenge to us to be on the alert to recognize Jesus when he comes to us each and every day of our lives in the encounters we have with all the different people we meet.

These days, our daily papers carry stories of families whose whole lives are filled with waiting. These are the families who have one of their members serving with the armed forces in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. Have you ever tried to imagine what the waiting might be like for a young mother whose husband is doing a tour of duty in a foreign land where he is exposed to danger all day every day? What the waiting and anxiety are like when a scheduled Skype conversation just doesn't happen? Yet this is the experience of countless families who have a loved-one away in a war-torn country. Waiting, in their case, is the cost of love. We've all probably had the experience of painful waiting - of sitting beside the bed of a friend or relative hovering between life and death, of waiting for a loved-one whose return from a risky assignment is overdue. If we are able to reflect on the experience, we come to realize our own powerlessness or we get an insight into our own deepest hopes and needs, or we come to a greater appreciation of the person for whom we are waiting.

Advent is also a reminder to us that we are still on our way through life's journey towards complete fulfillment in God. A whole host of writers have presented us with the metaphor of life as a journey. Chaucer did it in the *Canterbury Tales*, John Bunyan in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn*, to name but a few. It's a metaphor with which we are very familiar. Many of us know something of the *Camino* (It's full name is the *Camino de Santiago de Compostela*). It's a centuries-old pilgrimage route across the Pyrenees mountains and down to Santiago in Spain to the tomb of St. James the Apostle in the Cathedral of Compostela. The *Camino* has been the focus of renewed popularity in recent years and attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims annually.

There's a film about to be released in Australia called *The Way*. It's the story of four men who, for a variety of reasons set out to do the pilgrimage alone but providentially fall in together as they walk towards Compostela. It begins with the story of a young man named Daniel who had become distanced from his father, Tom, after dropping out of his doctoral studies in America. Daniel was killed in an accident during a freak storm in the Pyrenees not long after he had embarked on the pilgrimage. Tom flew to France to identify and reclaim Daniel's body. When he discovered that his son had embarked on *The Way* in an attempt to "find himself", Tom made an on-the-spot decision to complete the pilgrimage in Daniel's memory. Tom's inclination was to keep to himself and his own thoughts, but he found himself in the company of three other men, all with their own reasons for embarking on the 800 kilometre trek. There was an extravert Dutchman who was using the experience to shed excess weight but discovered within himself a depth of kindness and joy which he had not previously appreciated. There was an embittered, Canadian divorcee whose aim in doing the trek was to quit smoking, and who found forgiveness and acceptance along the way. The third of Tom's new-found friends was an Irish writer who was going in search of a story on which to base a novel. Instead, he found his lost faith. Tom had set out with the intention of scattering Daniel's ashes at the end of the journey. He ended up with a new understanding of, and a deep respect for, the son he had lost. The story is one of gradual, quiet, personal transformation. In their interactions, the four men inadvertently helped one another to discover the difference between "the life we live and the life we choose".

We can allow our lives to be just a disjointed set of experiences and circumstances. We can choose to make of our lives a journey in which every person we meet and every circumstance in which we find ourselves are a revelation of God's presence in our midst. God is both the road we travel and the destination of the pilgrimage on which we have embarked. Advent is a reminder to us to be alert along the way and to be open to seeing the unmistakable signs of God present in the people we meet and the events that happen to us. It's a reminder to us to live with the expectation that all in life is God's gift.