

Homily - 1st Sunday of Advent

The great theologian and Doctor of the Church, Saint Thomas Aquinas, begins his singular work *De Ente et Essentia*, "On Being and Essence," with a quote from the Philosopher, Aristotle:

"A small error at the outset can lead to great errors in the final conclusions."

Aristotle, and Thomas himself, of course, are speaking here primarily of the challenges of the process of reasoning itself.

While Thomas's concern in that case primarily related to metaphysics and his reflections on being itself, that principle is true in many more ordinary situations as well.

If you're trying to follow a roadmap, a path that takes you at a slightly different angle can put you miles off track in a very short time.

If you're baking for the holidays, the difference between a teaspoon and a tablespoon of an ingredient can decide whether your cookies are going to your loved ones or your garbage.

Some details matter, and matter most of all at the beginning of a process.

Our life of prayer is no different.

Our new liturgical year and this season of Advent begins with a warning:

"Be watchful! Be alert!"

It's a wake-up call of a spiritual kind.

And I think it's more relevant to us this year than ever.

If there's one word, one quality, one characteristic most of us can relate to, it's this one: Distracted.

How many sources of distraction do we have drawing our attention and alertness away from the things that matter most?

This isn't news to us. It shouldn't be.

It's basically a given that if we ask each other what our lives have been like, one of the first words that probably comes to mind is... "busy."

If you think you're the only one who feels that way, you're not. I've asked cloistered nuns that question, and they said the same thing!

But here's a different question - and I want you to seriously consider it: should we really be living our lives that way?

Does the Lord really want us to be permanently stuck in motion like a ping-pong ball, going from one activity to another to the end of our days without space for a prayer or a thought?

Yes, there are active times and seasons, especially for those of us called to work and minister in the midst of the secular world.

But to recognize the Lord's presence, and hear his voice, and respond to his will?

That requires attention, spiritual alertness, and an inner peace that can remain grounded in the middle of that storm of activity.

As we begin this Advent season, we are starting a time of preparation.

It's a twofold preparation: preparing first to encounter the newborn Christ in his Incarnation this Christmas, and then for our ultimate encounter when we come to the end of our lives and see him face to face in the fullness of heavenly glory.

But we need to begin this season correctly. As Saint Thomas would agree, if we start our Advent poorly, the odds are we won't see the sort of good fruit we would hope for in the end.

If this week feels the same as the last one, something's probably not quite right.

The prophet Isaiah expresses his frustration that even in his own time, more of God's people than not had completely lost their awareness of the Lord's presence.

"There is none who calls upon your name," he writes, "who rouses himself to cling to you; for you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us up to our guilt."

The Lord is ready to reveal himself if we are ready to encounter him - but that readiness is a choice.

Chances are, you may feel like adding one more thing to your life or schedule sounds like an impossible challenge.

What more can we possibly do this Advent?

If that's how you feel, you're right.

Instead, I have one simple invitation for you.

This Advent, I want you to do less.

The reason the people of Bethlehem weren't able to welcome the Holy Family into their homes wasn't because they didn't have enough to do, or that they weren't luxurious enough to deserve his presence.

It was because they didn't have space.

We need to make space for our Lord to dwell among us. And that may mean doing less. Planning less. Traveling less.

We may not be comfortable with that kind of space, or silence, or contemplation.

But what do we gain in return? Everything. Emmanuel, God with us - if we can receive him.

After this homily, and as we prepare to receive him in Holy Communion, I want to invite you to spend these next few moments in silence, and to continue your reflection after this Mass, praying on that question:

Where can you begin to do less this Advent, so that Christ can do more in your life?

Let's bring that question to the Lord now, as we remain here in his sacred presence.