

Homily - Second Sunday of Advent

“The day of the Lord will come like a thief.”

We’re hearing a lot of those reminders as we progress through the Advent season and continue in our anticipation of the Lord’s arrival this Christmas.

And St. Peter’s letter, much like the Gospel itself, warns us that as much as we like to control our timelines and our calendars, the Lord’s entry into our lives, most of all in his return in his Second Coming, is something we can never perfectly predict or control.

So what are we supposed to do about it?

It begins, as we reflected last week, simply by being self-aware and creating space for that encounter, especially in all the ways that Christ calls us to conversion, both during this season and throughout the rest of our lives.

But we might find it hard to maintain that state of readiness, to keep our focus when all the distractions of the world are calling out to us and trying to get our attention.

Saint John the Baptist’s mission, as we’ve heard in this Gospel, was to call the attention of his hearers back to the promise of their Messiah, but now with an added twist - that the Messiah was finally about to appear.

In a similar way, a traditional theme of prayer in the Advent season has always been to call to mind the fact that our own encounter with the Lord may indeed arrive sooner than we realize.

As many of you will remember from our Advent reflection series last year, one of the primary ways this has become part of our tradition is in the Church's reflections on what we call the Four Last Things.

These four points of reflection are, as you may recall, on Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell.

I always acknowledge that from our usual cultural perspective, this is a sort of taboo topic - very few people like to reflect on the idea of their earthly lives coming to an end.

We often experience this when death enters into a family, whether it is anticipated or unexpected, and the first reaction is one of denial and refusal to accept that separation, even in this life.

But we need to remember, from a Christian perspective, this should be a hopeful experience for us, even as it is one that is accompanied by the sorrow of the Cross.

Why? Because the Cross itself is a sign of hope for us - and whether we like it or not, our own experience of death is a moment for the ultimate encounter with Our Lord, who will surely come to us in that final time of transition just as he entered our lives through his Incarnation.

His judgment, likewise, is not in and of itself something we should fear, except as we recognize that if we grow careless and indifferent, it is entirely possible that we could choose to turn away from the offer of his love.

But for a Christian who has lived their life, no matter how brief or long it might have been, in a relationship of love and friendship with the Lord, then it will be the most beautiful experience of reunion when we finally see him face to face.

Advent is the perfect time to renew our commitment to preparing and watching for when that day will come, because, quite simply, we never know when or how that moment will arrive.

Just from my own time in seminary formation for the priesthood, I can think of two of my friends who were in the same preparation as I was, who passed away unexpectedly in the middle of that process of entering into their lives of ministry.

One from an unexpected and almost instantaneous illness, one in a surgery that should have been a quick and easy recovery.

We cannot assume we know the Lord's plan or timing. And so we have to examine our hearts in the light of his Holy Spirit and ask: are we ready?

Saint Augustine, one of the greatest witnesses to the transforming power of the Lord's merciful love, challenges us:

“But if we are all to sleep, how shall we watch?

Watch with the heart, watch with faith, watch with hope, watch with charity, watch with good works; and then, when thou shalt sleep in thy body, the time will come that thou shalt rise.”

We should take that exhortation to heart as we continue through the remaining weeks of this season.

Where have our hearts been drawn in the past days?

How strong is our hope?

How well have we lived charity toward others?

Where have we pushed ourselves to deeper generosity in our actions?

If we consider each of these questions in the light of eternity, we'll find that a lot of what we're worried about may not matter as much as we think.

And truthfully, we should find a new energy in thinking about our destiny, and in directing our lives in a more focused way toward living the Lord's Gospel.

Especially as many of us will be preparing to renew our hearts in the coming days through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, let's bring these questions to prayer so that we can make this far more than just a moment for checking a spiritual box.

This is the time to allow the Lord to set us on a new path, or back on the one where we know we belong.

It's the time to set aside the things that don't matter, and cling to those that do.

It is a time to be renewed in the virtues of faith, hope, and charity that flow from the heart of Christ himself, present among us on our altar and soon to enter our lives in a new way through the power of his Incarnation.

And so, let us ask ourselves, and Our Lord - are we ready for that encounter?

Am I ready?

Whatever still needs to be done, don't wait.

The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and now is the time to act.