

1st Sunday of Advent - C
Jeremiah 33:14-16;
I Thessalonians 3:12-4:2;
Luke 21:25-28, 34-36
Little Flower - 12/2/18

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new Church year. The word *advent* means coming. Our three readings today speak to the three comings of Christ. The reading from Jeremiah prophesies Christ's coming in history. The Gospel looks forward to Christ's coming in glory at the end of time. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul writes about preparing for Christ's coming in glory by welcoming Christ into our lives and hearts today.

During the first part of Advent, the Church focuses on preparing for Christ's future coming in glory. Christ's return in glory can be seen through two very different lenses: the lens of fear or the lens of hope. The images at the beginning of today's Gospel are certainly frightening images. Jesus even tells us that "*people will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world.*" At the same time, Jesus also tells us that after all these signs we will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When we see these signs, we are told to "*stand erect and raise [y]our heads because [y]our redemption is at hand.*" With these words, Jesus tells us not to fear his return. If we really believe that mercy is the quality most proper to God, we should have confidence in that mercy and not fear.

Throughout Advent, the Church asks us to prepare to welcome Christ into our hearts and lives today. It seems to me that if we want to welcome Christ into our lives and hearts today, we first have to recognize his presence, power, and activity in ourselves, others, the Church, and the world.

Saint Pope Paul VI reminded us that Jesus is really present to us in multiple ways. We certainly believe Jesus is really present in his Word, especially the Gospels. According to Catholic faith, the Bible is the living Word of God. We certainly believe Jesus is really present in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. As Catholics, we believe that the Eucharist really is the Body and Blood of Christ. However, we also believe that Jesus is really present in His Spirit within us and within others.

All of us are familiar with Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel: "*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*" [18:20]. This certainly means that whenever Christians are gathered together in prayer, Jesus is really present. However, I think it means more than this. I think it means that whenever Christians are trying to live a Christian life in community Christ is really present.

Also, Jesus identified himself with the marginalized and the persecuted. In the parable of the last judgment, Jesus said, "*Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me*" [25:40]. When Saul was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, Jesus appeared to him and said, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" [Acts 9:4]. Therefore, Jesus is really present in the marginalized and persecuted.

Jesus is present wherever there is real, even though imperfect, love in word or deed. The Holy Spirit living within us is the Spirit of love. In his First Letter, St. John was emphatic: "*Love is of God*" [4:7]. Also, in his First Letter, St. John is very clear: "*if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us....God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him*" [1 Jn. 4:12b & 16b].

My brothers and sisters, the point I am trying to make today is that if we are going to prepare to welcome Christ anew into our minds and hearts this Christmas, we first have to recognize his presence already within and among us. However, to recognize his presence within and among us, we have to open our eyes and see with eyes of faith.