

Today is Advent Sunday, the first Sunday in the church's year, and perhaps the day when we are most counter cultural, most out of step with what the rest of the world is up to. Just as the ads on telly are full of jolly Santas and glitz and tinsel, when the shops are becoming highly decorated with special Christmas offers, decorative lighting. So in church we go without flowers. We strip the altar of flowers we put on purple, which is the color for advent, the most somber of our liturgical colors. The only other time we use it is in Lent and the readings this advent as always have a foreboding, unsettling, even slightly disturbing tone.

Advent begins in the dark, in the midst of a season when we're all told to be jolly. Advent, at least for the church, is not a jolly time. The word advent comes from a Latin word, which means coming and on Advent Sunday and in the season of Advent, we think of the coming of Christ. Of course, as we go on towards the end of the season, we turn our minds to Jesus' first coming as a baby in Bethlehem. We also think of his coming at Pentecost, his coming to us by his spirit, who is with us now. But early in Advent, certainly on Advent Sunday, this is a season to think ahead to the second coming of Jesus at the end of time, while he will act decisively to establish his everlasting kingdom of justice and peace.

That great hope of a new dawn runs throughout scripture. We see it in our Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah who speaks of the day when God will judge between nations, they will beat their swords into plowshares and turn their spears into pruning hooks and nation won't learn war anymore. Jesus himself speaks of his return and the establishing of this new kingdom. That passage that we've just heard from St. Matthew is typical of that apocalyptic strand of Jesus' teaching

And it's echoed in the writings of St. Paul. We see it in our epistle today from Romans where Paul writes, "The night is far gone. The day is near." This is indeed a challenging aspect of Jesus' teaching. It's very easily misunderstood.

I'm always interested in the phenomenon of those who place bets on the second coming of Jesus. It happens every year. I saw that a casino in Las Vegas is at the moment offering odds of 800 to one of Jesus coming in the next calendar year. This is down, the odds are down from last year, which was a thousand to one against. Perhaps given the year we've had that's understandable, but it remains a sucker's bet. How could you ever win such a bet?

I mean, if Jesus does return and establishes a new kingdom in the next year, would your first thought be to rush to Las Vegas to claim your winnings? Are we to presume that dollars will be the appropriate currency in Christ's new kingdom? Personally, I hope there's no currency at all in God's coming kingdom, but I'm speculating as it is so often so easy to do at this time. So let me rein myself in and return to the gospel and pick out two imperatives that Jesus has there for his hearers.

The first is this. "Keep awake, keep awake for you do not know what day your Lord is coming," he says. St. Paul reinforces the point. "Now is the moment to wake from sleep." I don't know if you've ever thought about this before. A strange thought dawned on me this week that we don't know we are asleep until we wake up. You ever thought of that? We're never consciously, knowingly asleep. That's why Jesus mentions those people who were around in the days of Noah, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. They knew nothing until the water swept them away. That woke them up. They didn't know they were asleep.

It's hard to accept that we, like them, are not awake, that we are missing profound spiritual realities because we are fast asleep in the mundane, materialistic day to day round of life. We can so easily be slumbering amidst the physical reality of the material world that we miss the profound reality of the spiritual world. We need to wake up. We need to be roused from our materialistic slumber so that we can be alive to the God who is close by.

The central message of advent is simply this, wake up. The call of the season is to recognize that we are not paying attention to what really matters. We're called to confess that we are alive, yet dangerously asleep. The second of Jesus' imperatives in the gospel is this. Be ready. "Be ready," Jesus says, "For the son of man will be coming at an unexpected hour." Be ready for Jesus who will come like a thief in the night. I've never thought of this before, but I've been struck this week about what an odd and disturbing image this is to Jesus, to use of himself, to compare himself to a thief, to a robber.

Our advent calendars, if you are lucky enough to get a religious one, will feature acute winter scene with sheep and cattle at the center of which there might be an image of the baby Jesus in a manger. Yet Jesus gives himself or gives an image so far removed from that. His advent image is of a thief in the night. It's a slightly disturbing image. This isn't the cute baby Jesus. It's a long way from that, a long way from the Jesus who feeds the hungry and heals the sick.

This is Jesus as no respecter of boundaries, not interested in the status quo, doesn't care about being secure and comfortable. This is Jesus depicted as a thief, an invader, a disruptor. The implication of the thief in the night analogy is that Jesus isn't going to come in guises that we'd expect. If we think we have religion pinned down, if we think we know what revelation looks like, if we think we have Jesus all worked out, then advent reminds us that we're in for an unpleasant surprise.

If on the other hand, we approach God with our hands wide open, if we confess that we don't know really what to look for or where, if we empty ourselves of all preconceived notions of God and train our hearts to expect the unexpected, then we will be able to receive the real Jesus when he comes with joy. We're to be ready.

To stay with Jesus' thief imagery, as he said, the owner of the house wouldn't have let his house be broken into if he knew the thief was coming, he'd have installed cameras, put on an extra lock,

checked the burglar alarm. Advent is a time for us to reflect on what we need to do to be ready. That's an uncomfortable process. Advent for us is not a time of shallow sentimentality. It's a time of serious and profound reflection.

The book makers might want us to encourage to wager a few dollars on whether Jesus will return this year, but the gospel calls us to bet everything we have on the hope that is in Jesus and his kingdom. We are called to wager our very lives on the good news of Jesus Christ. In Advent the question before us is this: have we hedged our bets or are we living our lives in accordance with the coming kingdom? Are our life's chips still placed on the square marked hope? May we stay awake and be ready so that we are ready to receive Jesus in all his surprising and shocking ways when he chooses to appear. Amen.