

PRAYING AT ALL TIMES: FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT C

'Stay awake,' Jesus says to us today, 'praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.'

Parishes develop different customs. One known to me has a very appealing practice. In the Procession to the Altar with the Bread and Wine, a parishioner brings up the Parish Petitions Book. In offering to God their petitions along with the bread and wine the gathered people offer to God in their requests all the most important things in their lives. These include their greatest hopes and their deepest fears. That Petitions Book is always filling up. The one currently in use is the third for the year, as the previous two simply filled up and wore out.

If you could read through the book one page at a time, it would touch your hearts. People pray for everything you can imagine, but especially for the things you would expect – things to do with births, deaths, marriages and jobs. For births they pray e.g.: *'Lord, protect my child; make her grow up strong, healthy and faithful; let her be a child I can be proud of into my old age, a child who will continue my life of faith into the future.'* At deaths they pray e.g.: *'May he live with you for ever; and may we who remain live well in his absence, and in the light of his example.'* For weddings they pray e.g.: *'May we be a faithful and loving couple till our dying day.'* For jobs they pray e.g.: *'Lord, may I find the right work to give glory to your Name, pay my debts, fulfil my responsibilities and feed my family.'* And so forth and so on! All human life is here, and all human hopes and fears are here.

Some petitions are short; some are long. Some are elegantly written with full stops and capital letters in the right places. Some are scribbled in pencil, barely literate and legible. But God reads every kind of handwriting, just as he reads every heart.

This is a book that says many things about that parish as a community and, by implication, about any other. It says that the parish is a people of need and poverty of spirit. Many prayers are about some desperate need. It says that the parish is a people of hope and trust, who never despair that their prayers cannot be answered favourably. It says that they see themselves as a community that shares and cares – one that cares about one another's lives and needs. And it says most of all that they are a community of love. Hardly anyone in the book prays selfishly – simply and solely for themselves. Most pray for others, and those who do pray for themselves ask that God will make them better people towards their families, their friends, their workmates and their fellow parishioners.

If you had a chance to read this Book of Prayers, I think the concerns expressed would even bring tears to your eyes, and you would even want to pray along with their writers, that their hopes and dreams will be fulfilled, and that they will be set free from their fears and anxieties. I expect too that their Petitions Book would encourage you to do what Jesus today

asks us all to do: *'Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen, and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.'*

In the coming days, weeks and months, let me suggest that you and I make a frequent particular petition to God for the success of the National Royal Commission of Inquiry into Sexual Abuse. We might pray words like these: *'May the work of the Commission clean and purify the Church and all other institutions once and for all, of every kind of offence and depravity, and especially towards innocent children!'*

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