

THE CHALLENGE OF ADVENT-CHRISTMAS

We people celebrate important events, such as marriages and birthdays, especially of family members and friends that we know, love and appreciate.

On this first Sunday of Advent we begin our countdown to Christmas, when we will be celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world and our personal Saviour. So what are we meant to do, during our four weeks of preparation for Christmas? (I hope nobody is thinking 'shop till we drop', because that's definitely not the reason for the season).

Advent is a time to stop, look and listen, a time to look back and look forward, a time to take stock of our lives, a time to see ourselves as part of the bigger picture of both the Church and the world, a time to appreciate where we have come from and where we are going, a time to remember that all through the days, months and years of our lives, our God has been with us and beside us, and has kept loving us, no matter what.

More specifically, Advent is a time to hear God speaking to us about ourselves and our record, our Church and our world. It's a time for letting God remind us in our Advent Readings about becoming the kind of people we are meant to be and deep-down want to be – people of warm love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, fidelity and self-control. In responding to God's Word, we will express sorrow for the ways we may have become pre-occupied and wrapped up in ourselves instead, for the ways we may have become distant from God and others, and for any person we may have hurt, neglected or rejected.

Advent is also a time for doing justice, i.e. in the biblical sense, it's a time for recognising and promoting the dignity of others. In keeping with the Mission Statement of Jesus that he unrolled in the Synagogue of Nazareth, the time has arrived to use our personal, family and church resources to assist poor, 'havenot', malnourished and undernourished people, especially those close by.

We recognise too that this Advent-Christmas season does indeed suggest 'let's party'! So let's show outwardly our inner joy for being alive, for having a safe roof over our heads; food on our tables; clothes on our backs; shoes on our feet; money in our wallets or purses; health and strength for our tasks and responsibilities; and for our shared concern to preserve God's gift of our good and beautiful Earth in a harmonious balance. This Advent-Christmas season is a time for giving thanks for God's gifts of music to our ears; for movies, books, computers, internet, radio, television, DVDs and videos which inform and entertain us. It's a time for giving thanks for God's gifts of family and friends for company, support,

fun and laughter; for the treasure of the person of Jesus Christ in our church community to guide and challenge, comfort and encourage us; and for the gift of his Mother Mary as Mother of the Church, to inspire us by her total commitment and dedication, and to support us with her prayers. So, in short, Advent also means making time to count all our blessings and give thanks to the One 'from whom all blessings flow'.

In more Christian times, Sunday as a day of rest, relaxation, reflection and prayer, was taken seriously. In our mad, materialist, profit-motive, consumer driven society, in which having has become more important than being, and style and image more important than substance and sincerity, Sunday has become like any other day. The result is a far more hectic pace of life than any previous generation ever experienced, and more and more people with frazzled nerves, screaming inside them but unable to do anything about it, 'Stop the world, I want to get off!' The result of so much hyper-activity and so much overwork is too much pill-popping, too much drinking and too much drug-taking. The result, in short, is a deteriorating quality of life, with far less time just to be, to stop and think, to look and listen, and to contemplate e.g., the beauty of the ocean, a sunset, or the face of a child. The result is far less time to share and to care, and to savour and appreciate those best things in life that are free!

This Advent-Christmas season is therefore a new gift from God, who is inviting us both as individuals and as a church community to deliberately let go, on the one hand, of all the clutter of useless and unnecessary activities and of things which are crushing or diminishing us, and, on the other hand, to let God re-make us, our values and priorities.

This First Sunday of Advent is actually New Year's Day of our new Church Year. It is therefore an opportunity, like no other, to deliberately take time out for better care of ourselves, so as to be more available and generous to others. It's a precious opportunity to deliberately replenish our inner resources, reorganise our priorities and relationships, and to make time, more time than ever before, for family and friends, and for all those other people for whom our becoming new persons in this new Church Year, will make a difference.

So, dear People of God, what are we going to do about it?

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