

## Advent Homily. - December 16, 2017

Good morning!

When Maureen left a message on my telephone inviting me to do the Advent reflection my first impulse, of course, was to check the readings for the day. I was immediately touched by the promises of God through Isaiah.

The first reading from Isaiah speaks so warmly of God's compassion and love for the people of Israel.

"When you call out you will be heard; if you need bread and water, it will be given to you, you will have rich soil, abundant crops, spacious meadows, streams of running water, the light of the moon will be like the sun, and above all the Lord will bind up the wounds of his people and heal their bruises". Sounds wonderful doesn't it?

In the Gospel we get a clue about what Isaiah was referring to. We are told that Jesus went around to all the towns and villages teaching in the synagogues proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom - a kingdom yet to come and a kingdom that is already here. In the first reading Isaiah invites us to reflect on the riches of the Kingdom yet to come. In the Gospel Jesus mirrors for us what it means to be invested in the kingdom that is already here.

St Augustine reminds us, that, "We are but travelers on a journey without as yet a fixed abode; we are on our way, not yet in our native land; we are in a state of longing, but not yet of enjoyment." Advent is the time to remember that we are a pilgrim people. It is a time to reflect on our spiritual fitness for the journey that lies before us in our daily lives.

"The journey is never done advises Pope Francis, "just as in each of our own lives, there is always a need to restart, to rise again, to recover a sense of the goal of one's own existence."

In the Gospel Matthew highlights how Jesus engaged in the kingdom of God through his mission and ministry. We are told that his heart was filled with pity as he healed those with every disease and illness, and tended to the troubled and abandoned - sheep without a shepherd he called them.

Jesus then remarks sadly that "the harvest is abundant but the laborers are few. Ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for the harvest."

"Preach as you go," he said, "tell them that the kingdom of God is at hand. Right now! Right here! Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons."

Was Jesus speaking to us? Of course he was! We have been called to do all of that - heal the sick in mind and body - raise the dead from the hopelessness and despair in our society - cleanse the leprosy of the judgments leveled against the disenfranchised and abandoned, and cast out the demons in the minds and hearts of those who live without hope and dare I say, also work to cast out the demons so ominous in our social and political systems today.

We all know that there is so much to be done. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the magnitude of what the needs are and saddened by the limitations and helplessness of our responses.

As I was preparing this reflection I came across an article that touched me deeply. It was called, "The People of Advent". It was written from his prison cell by a Jesuit priest Father Alfred Delp SJ. He was imprisoned for his plans to develop the basis of catholic social teachings after the war in Germany.

Father Delp writes:

"Never have I entered into Advent so vitally and intensely alert as I am now. When I pace my cell, up and down, three paces one way, and three the other, my hands manacled, an unknown fate in front of me, then the tidings of Our Lord coming to redeem the world and deliver it have a different and much more vivid meaning.

It would be impossible to endure the horror of these times - like the horror of life itself - could we only see it clearly enough - if there were not this other knowledge which constantly buoys us up and gives us strength: the knowledge of the promises that have been given and fulfilled. And the awareness of the Angels of good tidings, uttering their blessed messages in the midst of all this trouble.... There is so much despair that cries out for comfort; there is so much faint courage that needs to be reinforced; there is so much perplexity that yearns for reason and meanings. Patience and faith are needed... We have received the message of God's herald angel and have ourselves encountered him."

Father Alfred Delp was martyred shortly after writing this.

Father Delp's story and writing erupted in me not only sadness but also a deep sense of outrage and awareness of how any sense of freedom and security have been annih-

lated in our country and our world. Individually and communally we experience a depth of vulnerability that many of us have not known before. I wondered how are we imprisoned in cells of our own making or of the powers that be? What should we do? How should we respond? What does our faith teach us at this troubling time?

John Dear, activist and peacemaker writes. "The duty of the Christian in these atrocious times includes keeping watch as peacemaking contemplatives, as a people of nonviolence in a culture of violence, with our hearts and minds ever ready to welcome the God of peace. We prepare for the nonviolent coming of our unarmed God by disarming ourselves - by pursuing peace between us at every moment."

"I have come to understand, says Benedictine, Sister Joan Chittister, that the voice of God is all around us. God is not a silent God. God is speaking to us all the time. In everything - through everything. I am only now beginning to listen - let alone to hear. In bare trees, she continues," I hear God saying that it is possible to die over and over and yet survive. I hear God saying that there is nothing that can't be endured. Not the storm - not the wind - not even the passage of time."

One thing is clear because God is often to be found in the darkness, in the empty spaces the more space we leave for God, the more God can be born in us. "I would like" writes Buddhist spiritual leader, Ram Dass, "for my life to be a statement of love and compassion - and where it isn't, that's where my work lies."

Perhaps one of the most fruitful things that we can do during this Advent to transform ourselves and our world is to take some time to do nothing - just wait - listening deeply and waiting gently. We need to sit in hope and confidence.

God continues to seek us in many ways. Even when, and maybe I should say, especially when, things are difficult - God invites and desires intimacy and relationship with us.

I would feel remiss if I did not mention that during the season of Advent we celebrate two feast days of Mary - the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8 and the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12. Mary appeared from December 9 to December 12, in 1531 to Juan Diego a 57 year old Indian peasant. He and many of his family members were converts to Christianity. Under Aztec oppression he had witnessed the religious practice of human sacrifice. On the way to Mass one morning he heard music and experienced the vision of a beautiful woman.

She appeared as a brown woman, dressed in the clothing of the poor, wearing the cultural band of pregnancy, standing on the moon, head bowed and hands folded in prayer. Her face blended European and indigenous American features showing multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural features.

Mary promised Juan Diego that as an ambassador for her Son she would show forth love and compassion, defense and support to all the people of the land. She heard their cries and would responded to their pain and suffering. She gave hope to people who at that time had no reason to hope.

Mary is certainly a role model for us in our Advent preparations. In her beautiful Magnificat, she proclaimed the good news of our salvation in Christ, the good news of a God who scatters the proud, exalts the lowly, and fills the hungry with good things.

In our country and world there are many today who believe that there are few reasons to hope. We are called to be witnesses to hope by the way that we live and by our response to those who negate and minimize the needs of the poor.

Advent is a time to recognize both our holy longing and the healing God desires for us and for the world. We are reminded that in spite of our troubled times, in the end all will be well! God keeps promises!

Let us rejoice with gratitude at the hopeful promise of Isaiah in today's first reading:

"No longer will your Teacher hide himself,  
But with your own eyes you shall see your Teacher,  
While from behind, a voice shall sound in your ears:  
"This is the way; walk in it! "