A Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent

We are now in the season of Advent. Welcome to this time of preparation and waiting. We await the celebration of Christmas and the revelation of the incarnation, but we are aware that it is imminent. Consider it like watching for the sunrise, knowing it is only moments away, but still needed to wait and watch until it is time.

But this is not just a time for twiddling thumbs and being patient while Christmas Day approaches. No. There is significant work to be done. Advent, like Lent, is a penitential season and it is important in and of itself, not just because of what follows. Do not rush this process and jump to the excitement of Christmas.

Because it is penitential, we have no flowers in the Church, and there are some liturgical changes that reflect a certain solemnity of the season. Consider the purple liturgical colour of these weeks a pertinent reminder that this is a time to attend to your relationship with God. There is a reason that Lent and Advent share purple as the colour of the season.

We need these seasons to remind us to return to the core of our faith, to check our priorities and our direction, and what we are focussing on. This is not intended to be a source of self-loathing and self-criticism, but the discovery of potential areas of change and growth. God is not punitive, but liberating. If we discover something about ourselves we do not like, it is because we have also been granted the power to change and develop in ways that are positive.

So, if Advent is a season of reflection and preparation, and a time for us to consider ourselves honestly before God, how ought we to live? What texts might we look to for guidance and inspiration? What do we have to help us along this Advent road?

The passage from the letter to the Romans is an important summary of Christian living. It outlines that all the major commandments are summed up in a single action: love. More specifically, "love your neighbour as yourself".

Love does no wrong, because it seeks the welfare of the other, in body, mind and soul. When we act out of love, we base our actions on the firmest of foundations. Michael Leunig once said this: "Love one another and you will be happy. It is a simple, and as difficult, as that."

'Love' also allows there to be some flexibility and consideration, because love is not rigid, there is give and take as the circumstance requires. It is important for us to take this into account. As human beings, we like things to be certain, but there are times when we need to negotiate, be considerate, and be willing to act in the best interests of a community rather than seek the fulfilment of our own desires and wishes.

After this summary, the letter reminds us to be vigilant. "Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep". But what does this mean? Should we be looking for signs of the second coming? Just how imminent is 'imminent'?

I think the best way for us to consider this passage is in practical terms. We need to make the most of the opportunities that are before us. We need to live each day knowing that our priority should be to care for others, to ensure that we live and act and speak from a position of love, because the time we have is precious.

The Gospel reinforces this message, with its warning that "the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour". Its language is a little more alarming, with its depiction of people suddenly disappearing and others being left behind. Yet there is a sense of hope in that we do indeed look to the coming of the Son of Man as something to be longed for with anticipation, and responded to with gratitude.

So, I think that these passages are not intended to make us panic, but to make us live well and to the full in the meantime. As Christians, we are to be people of love, and this is a call to make sure that we do all that we can to respond to God's love for us with love.

When the letter speaks of "putting on the Lord Jesus Christ", it means that we take Jesus' teaching to heart and live them out. We are called to rise above the things of the world, 'the flesh' and to focus on what truly matters – those things which allow us to live out our calling, and to be drawn closer to God's love.

The letter even names some of the things that we should be guarded against – revelling, drunkenness, debauchery and licentiousness, quarrelling and jealousy. When we consider these, they all affect the cohesion of the community in some way. We need to exercise self-control over ourselves and what we choose to do. We also need to be willing to take responsibility for our actions. Quarelling and jealousy erodes what could be healthy relationships and interactions, and causes hurt and harm on all sides. We need to be willing to examine ourselves, and commit to change and growth where needed. We also need to be willing to forgive others for their faults, hoping that our own will be forgiven in return.

This process takes time, and God has gifted us the season of Advent as the time for this work to begin. Thank God we have this opportunity every year, as an ongoing gift of grace. Advent is a precious time where we are called to slow down, appreciate the time we have, and to use it well in response to God's love for us. May we take these days of Lent and use them wisely, preparing our hearts and minds to encounter God when we ultimately celebrate the incarnation. If we do, we will have made our Advent the richest season possible, with a wonderful result.

Rev. Dr. Emily Fraser
All Saints, South Hobart and St Raphael's, Fern Tree
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