

## Happy New Year!

I speak to you in the name of He who Is, who Was and who is Yet to Come. Amen PBS

Happy New Year! It's the first day of the new year! How did you celebrate last night? What? You didn't celebrate the last day of the Christian Year?

I celebrated by writing this homily and going to bed early. Do I know how to party or what?

Advent is a time for new beginnings. Fresh starts. It is a time of anticipation and preparation. The days get shorter, the temperature goes down. Heavier coats come out. Cleaning, baking, shopping, card-writing all happens. We are changing gears as we prepare for the coming of Jesus.

The rest of the world is preparing for the end of the calendar year. It's a time of reflection, of looking back, of taking stock. Of making resolutions or promises for next year.

We are now in Year "A" which means the gospel we will primarily use is from Matthew.

There are four weeks in Advent: Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. The readings may or may not reflect these themes, as these themes are tied mostly to the four Advent candles, which are part of the Advent Wreath. Having an Advent wreath in worship is a note of contention in some traditions, as originally the Advent wreath was designed for Community Worship and was then adopted into individual homes, a practice which remains today.

You will note in our wreath, there are three blue candles and one pink candle. On the third week of Advent I will wear pink vestment as that is Gaudete or "Joy" Sunday. The fifth candle or Christ Candle will be lit Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Then the Advent Candles go away for another year. Safely packed away in the recesses of the Church.

This week, we light the candle for Hope. The readings for this week, Advent I, Year A are reflecting this theme. The first reading, from the prophet Isaiah, who features more than any other old testament prophet during this time, tells us that times are changing, the community is shifting its focus from the making of war to the making of peace. Of God Isaiah writes, "He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more". (Isaiah 2.4, NRSV)

What a beautiful image. Beating instruments of war (swords and spears) into instruments of farming or life (ploughshares and pruning hooks) Ploughshares in the bible are not the same as we think of them today. They were considered any hand tool that was used to create life as opposed to one who's purpose was destruction and war.

Pruning hooks were small as they were made from a spear point and shaped like a sickle. They were used to prune back superfluous shoots or vegetation in order to produce healthy growth. A pruning hook symbolised prosperity as the field or area would be bountiful and experiencing new growth, as opposed to an overgrown area that could choke new growth off and become barren.

Isaiah is encouraging hope in the community; to lean away from war and to lean into peace. To wait for the new life to happen as the old life is passing away. A time of great anticipation and that anticipation is of great joy.

Psalm 122 also speaks to hope; the hope of peace in Jerusalem.

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

"May they prosper who love you.

Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers."

For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you."

For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good". Psalm 122.6-9

The Psalmist is calling on the community to love itself and to love each other.

To seek peace, practice peace, love each other. To seek the best in each other and in themselves.

This theme is also reflected in Paul's letter to Rome. He speaks of the summary of the law, that most important law by which Jesus would have us live our lives. Paul writes "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13.8-10, NRSV)

The ten commandments that were given Moses all those years ago have been difficult for humanity to keep. Some of them moreso than others. Paul saw his role as one of mediator; as one who was planting Churches and teaching new believers he was seeking to show them the best way to God. And while the ten commandments are important in our faith formation and in living our best lives in the world, they can occasionally cause people to lose sight of each other.

They can cause us to become fixated on laws and forget out supporting each other. The summary of the law which is to love \_\_\_\_\_ (God) and to \_\_\_\_\_ (love our neighbours as ourselves) is a universal commandment.

If we love our neighbours we are less likely to rob them. Or covet something they have. If we have a disagreement with a neighbour, because we are in relationship with them we are more likely to try and work things out rather than involving officials.

Don't get me wrong, Jesus is not commanding us to be Holy Doormats. We are to stand up for who we are and stand strong. We can disagree with our neighbours and still love them. Any of you have children? Any of you lived through their toddler years? Their teenage years? Were there days when you loved them, yet didn't like them very much? Then you see what I mean...you can love someone and, at times, still not like them.

And that's okay. That's healthy. Paul is remind us that loving our neighbour means doing no wrong to them. And by extension, that they will do no wrong to us. And the realization of that love is the fulfilling of the law.

And now onto the Gospel for today.

Matthew is preparing the community for the return of Jesus. When that will happen nobody knows. We don't know from where Jesus will come. We don't know exactly when Jesus will come. We don't know what he'll look like.

Matthew writes "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (Matthew 24.36, NRSV)  
Remember, in Matthew's time it was believed that Jesus return was imminent. There is often urgency written into the waiting for Jesus return.

Matthew implores us to be prepared. For those of us who were Girl Guides, Boy Scouts, members of the AYPAs or CGIT you know what I mean. Be prepared. Have enough fuel in your lamps or batteries in your flashlights. Have enough provisions for the journey or granola bars for your backpack. Have a map at the ready. Keep the door unlocked and be waiting in anticipation. He writes "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. (Matthew 24.44, NRSV)

It's strange to be hearing of a second coming when we are in the season of preparing for the birth of Jesus.

Strange, yet reflective.

We know that the baby is to be born. We have heard the stories, arguably, hundreds of times and here we are again...waiting.

Why do we have to tell these stories again and again? Don't we know them by heart by now?

It's like this...anticipation isn't something we practice these days. We're all about instant gratification. We, as a society, don't save up until we can afford, we put it on our credit cards. Right now we're being bombarded with Black Friday Sales. Then it will be Christmas Sales, Boxing Week Specials and then the MasterCard bill comes in January and it takes a year to pay off the balance. Anticipation is replaced with fear and dread.

We know the stories of Jesus birth, his death, his resurrection. We can likely recite parts from memory. Yet that isn't what this season is about.

The word Advent is derived from two latin words "Ad" and "Venire" which translate "to" and "come". Advent = To Come. We are waiting on the second coming of Christ.

We are post-resurrection people. And while we wait for Jesus to return we celebrate Advent. We spend time listening to stories. We prepare ourselves emotionally, liturgically, spiritually for the coming of God to Earth.

We take time to clean our houses and prepare for company. We take time to plan menus and buy food and drink. We take time to make or buy gifts and wrap them. We take time to make or buy Christmas cards that we send to friends and family far and near.

Yes, we are preparing for Christmas. Yes, this is the start of the New Christian Year. We are gathering together with hopeful anticipation. Looking forward to lighting the candles, singing the hymns, hearing the stories, spending time together and breathing through the shorter days, longer nights and hope-filled promises of the good that is to come.

Happy New Year! May this year begin with hope, peace, joy and love. And may those wonderful things carry you through the dark times until we see the light once more.

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Advent IA - Hope  
Isaiah 2.1-5  
Psalm 122  
Romans 13.8-14  
Matthew 24.36-44