

Third Sunday of Advent A - What are your dreams this Advent season?

December 15, 2019

The Season of Advent seems to be the most confusing and yet most inspiring of our church seasons. As said in previous Advent Sundays, it is a season in which the readings focus on the paradox between the sometimes harsh reality of the earthly world and the hopeful dreams of the heavenly realm to come. In this Sunday's first reading, the image of the wilderness as transformed by God's hand is described quite clearly: *"The desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom. They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song."* (Isaiah 35:1-2). It may be difficult for us in the urban modern world to fully comprehend how threatening the desert was to people in the time of Isaiah and John the Baptist, but the desert wildernesses in the Middle East were places of danger and death to be feared and avoided.

The concept of the wilderness is not restricted to physical places. We can find ourselves in physical, emotional, financial, social, or spiritual wildernesses. Those of us who have been in one of those places know just how terrifying such a wilderness can be. Now perhaps our world is that lush valley overflowing with milk and honey. Maybe our life is so wonderful that we cannot relate to the metaphor of the wilderness. But we meet people living in it. And when we, or someone we know, is in a wilderness, it challenges our faith. We live in a world of expectations that are sometimes difficult, if not impossible to meet. As Christians, we must realize that many of these standards and expectations are not consistent with Jesus's life and ministry; they do not promote love, justice, and compassion, but rather lead us into the wilderness of greed, deception, and selfishness. How do we keep our faith and our hope, in the midst of a secular world that is a wilderness of greed, lust, injustice, and hate? The answer is simple: prayer, study, worship, community and service.

Dreams. Dream is what Advent is about; that is what being a Christian is about. The Isaiah and Matthew (11:2-11) passages this Sunday both called the people of those times to dream of escaping the wilderness. They challenged those people (and us today) to be messengers, to be prophets, to be dreamers of a better world. The question that is timeless and universal is, how do we keep our faith, our hope and our dreams when we fall into a wilderness? If a parish is at its best, if it is faithful to Christ's call, it will provide the environment to bring its members out from the wilderness. It will provide fellowship with other non-Christian dreamers. It will nourish members by the Sacrament, the liturgy, and the preaching of the Word. Educational programs help members know Jesus more deeply so that they can follow Him more intensely. Opportunities to serve the community are provided so that members can be the hands and feet of Christ in this world. This is why regular attendance at liturgies and participation in the programs of the Church are so important. This is how Christ's people are fed and strengthened for the journey through the wilderness. **What are your dreams this Advent season?** What is your image of the realm of God? What are you doing to make those dreams become reality? As members of a parish community, of a diocese, as followers of Christ, all are called to work and pray to bring about a world that fulfills the ministry of Jesus Christ. What does this world look like? It is a world described by three words: love, justice, and compassion. In the context of today's society, this is a big dream. But those who share this dream are in good company. Throughout the ages, there are prophets and messengers who have held onto this dream and have given their lives to bring love, justice, and compassion to a world that reject those values. There have been people in the Church who have devoted their work and lives to proclaiming love, justice, and compassion in the name of Jesus.

Our St Paul Parish Pastoral Council has just renewed the Parish Mission **"Love God, Live the Sacraments, Build His Kingdom"** and did a survey asking parishioners how the Mission can be successful achieved. Advent is the time to renew our dreams and to resolve to work in making those dreams a reality. Does this parish have **a vision, a dream, and a mission** which calls its members to work in bringing the love, justice, and compassion of Christ to this community and to the world beyond? Are the visions and missions just words nicely posted on the bulletin board with no plan, no actions and no work to fulfil the dreams? Advent is the time to renew our commitment to this vision and this mission. If we are to accept the challenge of being followers of Christ, we must be dreamers, and doers as well. Being a Christian means that we are vitally engaged in ministries that will bring the love, justice, and compassion of Jesus to the wilderness of this world. We must be prophets, messengers and ministers of the Good News of Jesus. Our dreams are precious. In good times and bad. Our vision of a better world, a world in which we experience God's justice and mercy, is what gives us hope and confirms our faith. Advent is the time that calls us to dream of the future coming of Christ, because we know that Jesus came once before, the God incarnate came into a world that was sitting in darkness and lost in the wilderness, in the form of a vulnerable child; a child so poor that, like so many children today, he had no place to lay his head. **Let us be messengers and ministers of God's love, justice, and compassion in all that we say and do. Let this be our Advent dream and hope!**

This third Sunday of Advent is also called the Gaudete Sunday. The day takes its common name from the Latin word *Gaudete* ("**Rejoice**"), the first word of the Entrance Antiphon of this day's mass: "Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete. Modestia vestra nota sit omnibus hominibus:". This is translated as: "**Rejoice in the Lord always: again I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near.**" (Philippians 4:4-5). Theologian Henri Nouwen once said, "**Joy is "the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing - sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death - can take that love away."** No matter what conditions we are in, **remember we are unconditionally loved. Make an Advent dream.**