

Advent Sunday St. Marylebone 11 am 2016

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Through the Sundays of Advent, as we move towards Christmas, the Church has, traditionally, reflected on the Four Last Things: Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell; four themes which do not sit very easily or comfortably with tinsel and sparkle, competitive Christmas advertising and frantic shopping!

Increasingly, as the years unfold and as Christianity becomes, for the vast majority of people a complete irrelevance, how does the Church prepare not just herself but people the world over to celebrate the coming of the Christ Child in Bethlehem and the coming again of that same Christ Jesus as Judge to usher in the end of time ?

It is not a new conundrum.

During the latter years of the third century, as Christianity became established throughout the Roman Empire and the days of persecution and martyrdom were left behind, men and women followed Anthony

into the deserts of Egypt to escape what they saw as a world losing its way.

The Desert Fathers - and Desert Mothers - fled what they saw as people being increasingly shaped and formed not by preparations for the coming again of Christ, but by the Seven Deadly Sins of Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy and Pride.

Quite what the Desert Fathers and Mothers would make of today's world, Heaven only knows!

So how *do* we live in a world which encourages us – daily - to live lives of excess, lives of instant gratification shaped by the marketing tools of Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy and Pride? How do we keep our eyes and our hearts fixed on the Christ for whom we long, the Christ whose advent we await?

Well, if you try to escape to the Desert today, it is likely that you will find a luxury resort filled with billowing linen curtains, scented candles and liveried waiting staff! The desert today is part of the problem, not the answer to the problem!

Charles de Foucault, whose martyrdom at Tamanrasset in the Sahara in 1916 is remembered on Thursday of

this this week, abandoned the life of a young aristocratic cavalry officer and went off into the African desert in search of God.

But whilst Charles made the desert his home, what he discovered there was that one did not need to go off into the Sahara to find the desert.

The desert, in fact, as Charles quickly discovered, is as much a state of being as a place; that the desert is always around us - if we only open our eyes and our hearts to see it.

Our Christian calling demands that, rather than flee into the desert, we share the joys and hopes of living a gospel life where we are. What our Christian calling does not demand, is that we simply succumb to the world's prevailing mores or buy-in to a narrative that is the antithesis of that to which we are called.

As Christian men and women who stand under the gracious and gentle judgment of Christ and who await his return, we, of all people, have to be aware of our human situation in every aspect of our lives: within our families and most intimate relationships, in our places of work and leisure.

God calls us, where we are, to open our eyes and see with Jesus' eyes, to open our ears and hear with his ears; not so that we can pass judgement upon the world around us – that is not our calling – but in order that we might better serve the world with *his* hands and be the reconciling and healing agents of *his* blessing wherever we find ourselves.

The Church has, perhaps, become too timid in defending or proposing Christian truths and values whilst we watch alternative faith and value systems prevail and triumph.

Our all-too-fragile faith seems to have lost its determination to proclaim the Kingdom which Christ has ushered in and which we are called to live and extend, as we confuse tolerance with indifference.

Charles de Foucault did not shout big slogans: his way of living the gospel life amongst those who did not share his values or hold to the gospel message he espoused arose out of a quite different conviction: he started from a solid, lived-out faith, a transparent and confident faith that in and of itself, by God's grace, even without big words, was strong and courageous, but also humble, a living, breathing, witness to the Christ who had come and who would come again.

At the end of 1910, de Foucault wrote that, “*Jesus suffices. There where he is, nothing lacks. Whosoever relies on him is strong with his invincible strength*”.

If we live lives like that, lives of witness that are transparent and confident, others will be challenged to reflect on the values by which they live; to ask themselves questions about the world they create and inhabit and propagate; a world to which to which others, all-too easily, succumb.

But we can only be truly authentic to our calling, if we really do try to live the values of the Kingdom; if we live that which we seek to defend.

As the Blessed Charles recognized, “*It isn’t the words, it’s the life that convinces. One does good with what one is, much more than with what one says ... one does good when one is of God, belongs to Him! When that happens, one doesn’t need to invent anything else. It’s enough to stay where one is, to let the graces of God penetrate, grow and consolidate in the soul, defend oneself from agitation*”.

As Christians, we live in a world of breath-taking spiritual poverty, yet we are rich. Why should we not want to share the treasure we have with those who have nothing: those for whom Christmas, if it is about

anything, is only about turkey and tinsel, and overindulgence, and outdoing one-another in the buying of presents which no-one really needs or even wants?

The desert today is a desert far different from the one into which the Desert Fathers and Mothers fled; it is very different even from the desert of the Tuareg into which Charles de Foucault penetrated, lived out his vocation and died.

Our calling, this advent – and indeed every day of every year - is to live an evangelical life in the places where God has set us, among the people God has given to us to live with and among, an evangelical life that sets before the world the Gospel's prophetic alternative.

To do that, we don't need endless reflection on the Four Last Things (although a bit of that wouldn't be a bad thing); we need to have the courage to get down and live intentional lives that convince others that Christ has indeed been born in Bethlehem, died on Calvary, rose again at Easter and shall come again in glory!

Even so, Maranatha!
Come, Lord, come!