

Advent Week 1:

A Reflection by Fr Nick King SJ

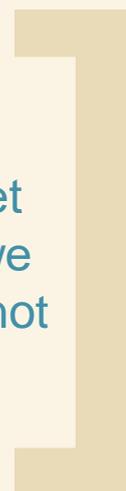
This Sunday we start the new round of the Church's year, and Advent begins; while "out there", people are preparing office parties and spending vast sums on presents and drink. Obviously that kind of unthinking consumerism is simply appalling in a world where more human beings than ever before in our history have been forced to leave their homes and countries. The readings for next Sunday, however, make it clear that Advent is not to be an excuse for mindless carousing; they carry a sense that something new is on the way, with vague hints of discomfort.

In the first reading, Isaiah, at a very difficult time for Israel, when the country was under threat from violent enemies, foresees something very new for his country: "It shall be at the end of days that the mountain of the House of the Lord shall be established as the top of the mountains; and it will be lifted up above the hills".

Now those who first heard Isaiah knew perfectly well that the hill on which the Temple was built was by no means the highest mountain in Jerusalem; but in a time of terrible uncertainty he was pointing to the future. And the prophet was certainly correct in saying that "all the nations shall stream to it". The point however is not really about foretelling the future, but about what God is going to do, "that he may teach us some of his ways and we may walk in his paths". That is the name of the game, and then "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning-hooks", which is what our world needs.

For we are tired of war, and so above all are those whom we call "refugees". When we so label them it sometimes enables us not to take them seriously as human beings. So the slogan to guide us through Advent is "House of Jacob, come let us walk in the light of the Lord". If we did that, then the homeless would not be homeless.

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The psalm for this Sunday is one of the pilgrimage songs that they used to sing on their way up to Jerusalem; and we should notice that it begins “I”, but soon turns to “we”. That is what pilgrimage does for you; those who have listened to the stories of refugees and immigrants know what story-telling can do by way of teaching us to care. The poet is captivated by Jerusalem’s beauty, and desperate that we should pray for peace: “Ask for peace for Jerusalem; may they do well, those who love you”. And we hear the pilgrims’ response indeed we might make it our Advent prayer: “I shall say, ‘peace be upon you. For the sake of the House of the Lord I shall look for your good’.” Remember what peace means: it means the world turning out the way that God intended, and that means it is not all right for people to be homeless while the wealthy throw parties.

In the second reading, Paul has a sense that he must stimulate the Romans into realising what time it is. “Know that it is the right time, because it is the moment for you to wake from sleep”.

He tells them (and us) that the moment is coming, “the day has drawn near” (so there is a sense of urgency here); and that means that it is time for appropriate behaviour, not the kind of thing that those office-parties will soon be asking you to do: “carousing and hard drinking, sexual intercourse and licentious living, quarrelling and fanaticism”. Instead we are invited to “put on Jesus Christ”, like an actor playing the greatest of all roles, and not to “make plans for cravings”. And who is being invited to “wake from sleep”? Why, obviously, those who walk by on the other side when faced with the needs of migrants and refugees, muttering “don’t bother me now”.

The gospel is also pretty stark, reminding Jesus’ hearers of “the days of Noah, before the Flood”, when they just carried on with their ordinary living, unaware of the imminence of God’s time “until the day when Noah went on board the Ark. And they didn’t get it until the Flood took them all away”. Then Jesus applies this to “the coming of the Son of Man”, a time when “two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left; two women grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left”. After this comes the point, to which you and I are invited to pay careful attention, a lesson from ordinary life with which we can easily identify in our world: “Be aware of this, that if the householder knew at what time the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake, and would not have let his house be broken into”. So in our time, as Advent goes its way, we have to “be ready – for at an hour when you’re not thinking, the Son of Man is coming”. There is food for reflection here; the Son of Man can come uncomfortably and unpredictably into our lives, and turn everything upside down. There is nothing to say that we shall avoid turning into refugees and migrants because of who we are and where we come from. There are many refugees in our world today who just a few years ago could look calmly at a prosperous future in a stable political setting. For the present we are simply waiting in our nakedness for the Lord’s coming, whatever that may mean. What is the new thing that is speaking to you today, demanding your attention this Advent?

