

A Message for Advent 2011



Living in Hope and Welcoming Christ
Diocese of Ardagh & Clonmacnois

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In Ardagh and Clonmacnois we have to wait patiently. In saying so I am thinking of what is inevitably a slow journey towards a fully restored St Mel's Cathedral. As time passes, it is the senior citizens that are asking me with growing urgency when major work will be under way. Those with long associations with the cathedral, and I include myself here, are inevitably wondering if we will be here to experience its doors opening to receive people again.

These could be sombre thoughts. They are relieved by thinking about what this Advent Season is saying to us about waiting, waiting in hope. It is the time of the year when the whole Church goes into a waiting mood. If Christmas is to be right for us, we have to wait for it. It would be best if we did not anticipate Christmas by prematurely celebrating it, I believe. But, more importantly still, it would be most helpful if during this waiting time we could make time to think and pray. Advent is first and foremost a time to wait in hope.

There are four weeks in Advent, four Sundays with different thoughts for these weeks of waiting. There are different voices that speak to us. Long before the time of Christ some of those whose words we hear were already aware, in a vague way, how the great longing and hope of the human family was to be fulfilled. We notice in the weeks of Advent a growing urgency in those who foresaw that someone special was to come, someone compared to the Rising Sun, as St Luke's Gospel puts it, "God will bring the rising Sun to visit us". In the darkest weeks of the year Christ the Light of the World comes.

St Paul uses an expression about the time when Christ came which is sometimes used by people who do not know its origin: "In the fullness of time (God sent his son)". What does "the fullness of time mean"? I do not know if anyone can say with certainty what this mysterious phrase means. However, one could guess that it had something to do with the chaotic state in which God's People found themselves just then. They were not masters in their own house. We know from the story of the Passion and Death of Jesus that the Jewish people had lost control of their country



and could mostly only do what their Roman colonisers let them do. They were humbled, brought to their knees, aware that they were in great need of a Redeemer.

St Luke sets the scene. He describes what we would call nowadays "the political landscape" at the time when John the Baptist started his preaching. Tiberius Caesar was Emperor and Pontius Pilate was the Governor of Judea. They and not the Jewish Priests were the real rulers. This was the world into which God intervened in the most stunning way: "The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph..."

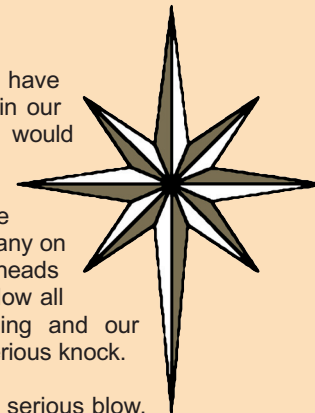
These words of St Luke point to the unexpected intervention of God into the disorder and disarray of the world. What St Paul called the "fullness of time" was what may have been seen as a truly low moment in Jewish history but also one that opened the way to a new sense of dependence on God.

"Come, Lord Jesus"

Many people, indeed most people, have reason to see this time as a low one in our history. Five years ago in Ireland we would have hopes of being still on the crest of a great wave of progress. Our booming economy was still receiving applause and our leaders commendation from many on the world stage. We were holding our heads high among the nations of the earth. How all has changed! Our economy is reeling and our employment prospects have taken a serious knock.

Our Christian faith has also received a serious blow. Our Church has had its face tarnished. Vocations have gone into serious decline. We are most painfully aware that the Church has, through some of those entrusted with caring for the vulnerable young people, caused serious pain and inflicted great damage. Our times, our generation are also in need of the coming of the Redeemer. It is two thousand years since Christ lived but He is still needed, still urgently needed to restore and renew.

The last book of the Bible, the last of the New Testament is the Book of Revelation. It ends with the prayer "Come, Lord Jesus". The Book is a largely a series of descriptions of plagues and suffering inflicted on the Christian Churches for their failures and faithlessness. However, the Book of Revelation does not end on a depressing note, the very opposite in fact. The Book



ends with a magnificent picture of the beauty of the New Jerusalem, the city of God for which we are destined. In spite of all the grief and the pain that is described in the Book of Revelation the reader is left with the final line, a prayer, a prayer to cry aloud: "Come, Lord Jesus".



This is the prayer of Advent time, "come, Lord Jesus". Waiting for what we long for desperately is painful but not totally so as long as we know that what we long for will come. Small children believe their parents when they promise that they will get things they long for. Adult belief is essentially the same except for the fact that the source of our belief is ultimately in the God in whom we trust. It is the loving God made known to us in the life and teaching of Jesus since our childhood that we place our hope. Children in Primary School have a song which they sing with gusto. It is about how good they feel about themselves, "because Jesus told us so"! Adults, all of us, need to be reassured that we can rely on what Jesus tells us about how much we are valued and how much we are loved by God.

Joy to the World

At the end of Mass one of the ways in which the Celebrant is told to say a farewell to the congregation is: "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life". These words would seem to be especially appropriate to the dismissal at the end of the Masses of Christmas. They might be understood as encouraging the people to bring "joy to the world", to use the words of a well known Christmas carol. Most people who come to the celebration of the Mass of Christmas have the look of joy in their eyes and the sounds of joy in the way they greet one another.

I know that there may be many who feel very differently in their hearts from how they look and sound. Christmas because it is so emotionally charged that there are many ways in which our hearts are touched, some painful as well as some joyful. However, there is a word that for centuries was used to sum up the message of one of the Sundays of Advent, the Latin word



Gaudete, translating as 'rejoice'. The word comes from the letter St Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi. He wrote: "rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say: Rejoice".

Is it right to order people to rejoice? Would the Philippians who happened to be suffering feel annoyed that he would say the like to them? Did he feel confident that they were faith-filled and ready to accept the pains of life in such a way that they would not prevent them from feeling the joy which was deep enough to carry them through the sadness without losing heart? From what we know about the life of St Paul he was no stranger to pain and suffering, never without concern for all the Churches. In spite of all the grief and pain he endured Paul still merited the title 'Apostle of joy'.

Loneliness is often seen as what undermines the joy of many, even those whom one would expect to be happy. It can be felt particularly intensely at Christmas, possibly more after Christmas than before. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta said that 'loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible type of poverty'. If that was true in the poverty of Calcutta where she did her great work, it is true of ours too. The recently elected Michael D. Higgins as our President recognises that a greater sense of inclusion needs to be high on the priorities of our country. I think that this is close to recognising the truth of what Mother Teresa said.



The many people who loved to come to St Mel's Cathedral for Mass at Christmas will feel once again this year some of the pain of being homeless, in a sense. To all who think like this I would say that we can turn that pain into something positive. So let's try to remember that longing for better is part of what a follower of Christ must be. St Paul said it like this: "we do not have here a lasting city but look for one to come". There are better things than having a Christmas of lavish spending. Let our sincere prayer be the last line of the last book of the Bible: "Come, Lord Jesus" or, as a Christian of the early days of the Church would have said it, "Marana' tha".

