

I don't know whether you noticed it but the Friday before last was listed as Black Friday. It was a day of bargains in the shops, all with the idea of getting us through the doors and spending. It is that time of year already – a number of stores had special offers on electrical and household items – all with the idea of getting ready for Christmas.

But there is so much to do, so many deadlines – deadlines for cards, deadlines for parcels, deadlines for on-line shopping. Then there are the preparations for Christmas dinner, presents to get – what do you get the elderly uncle who seems to have everything – the food for Christmas dinner, the tree, the decorations. So little time left, so much to do .....

Maybe that is a bit of a parody – but in all the busyness of the run up to Christmas there is an emphasis on doing, upon deadlines. Advent, the season we have just entered upon, has by contrast an emphasis upon waiting, upon watching, upon responding. I want to just remain with that contrast between the busyness of this time of the year and the patience of Advent..

Our Gospel reading this morning from Mark's Gospel, continues the theme we have been following for the past number of weeks of waiting, of anticipation. Our passage ends with an injunction to keep awake. The word used here has connotations of not just 'not being asleep', but of alertness, of being attentive. It contains a lovely illustration of attentiveness, the sort of watchfulness to stop whatever else we are doing and to look.

<sup>28</sup>From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near

Two weeks ago, in the context of our service of dedication, we incorporated two baptisms in the service.

For anyone with a baby in the house, you are attentive, you are alert for the sound of your baby's cry – you learn to distinguish between a cry of distress and what we would have called a grumpy cry. You are alert for the signs of teeth coming, of sickness. With your health visitor you will look out for signs of development, when she started to sit up, when she will start walking, talking. Then as she grows up you will watch, you will be attentive to her particular gifts, watching for signs of particular talents to encourage, to help her develop.

Of course as parents we will do lots of things for our children, but doing is not enough – there must be that patient watching, a discernment to our parenting. I just want to bring these thoughts of watching, of discernment back into our thoughts on Advent; setting the patience of Advent over and against the busyness of Christmas. With that, I want to place the realisation that the arrival of a child in the house is nothing less than a life changing, life enhancing encounter.

At the heart of Advent is the fundamental theme of preparing for Christ, welcoming Christ, encountering Christ. If this encounter is to be life enhancing, life changing, life challenging we need to move beyond the conceptual and towards the particular. The early Irish Church had a very strong sense of the presence of God, and recognising that presence, in nature, in people, in the world about us. Hymn 611 in our Hymn Book, based on St Patrick's Breastplate, is a prayer that very much expresses that insight.

- 1 Christ be beside me,  
Christ be before me,  
Christ be behind me,  
    King of my heart.  
Christ be within me,  
Christ be below me,  
Christ be above me,  
    never to part.
  
- 2 Christ on my right hand,  
Christ on my left hand,  
Christ all around me,  
    shield in the strife.  
Christ in my sleeping,  
Christ in my sitting,  
Christ in my rising,  
    never to part.
  
- 3 Christ be in all hearts  
thinking about me,  
Christ be on all tongues  
    telling of me.  
Christ be the vision  
in eyes that see me,  
in ears that hear me,  
    Christ ever be.

*Hymn 611*

I get a picture here of Christ living in me and Christ living through me in the world of today. I think of words of Paul,

<sup>20</sup> and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. *Gal 2:20*

If I am one who welcomes Christ that means I am prepared to be one who acts, who thinks as Christ would, that in my life, in my actions, in my attitudes others might see something of Christ in me.

But this business of welcoming Christ goes much further than that. If I am going to talk about the presence of Christ in my life, then I also have think

about the presence of Christ in other people. Christ present in my family, in my neighbour, in the person I meet in the office, in school; Christ present in the people I may not like, in people I find difficult; Christ present in the person selling ‘The Big Issue’, the prisoner, the alien, in the one totally different to me.

I began by setting a contrast between the busyness of Christmas and the patience of Advent.. We then went on to think about life changing, life challenging, life enriching encounters in the context of the arrival of a child in the house. Advent is about a life changing encounter with Christ. If Advent is about preparing to welcome the coming of Christ, and if that is to be more than just a pious hope for the future, then we have to be changed by that prospect as we prepare to welcome him not in some point in the distant future. We welcome him, serve him, worship him in our love and service of one another.

‘As much as you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.’