

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle C

So just two weeks to go before the Season of Advent. Two weeks... And the Church again gives us dark readings, readings about sin and end times. The Church is reminding us, in fact, about the seriousness of our faith commitments. It's reminding us that there's a lot at stake in how we live our lives.

And so a memory... This is the time of year, in which, a beloved former pastor would startle many of us who were sitting in the pews by asking a simple question: *"Did you ever think that this might be your last Advent? Look around you,"* he would say. *"I guarantee that – for some of you, at least – this will, indeed, be your very last Advent. And given this, wouldn't it be a good idea for all of us to make this coming Advent the best one we've ever experienced?"*

Well, that got our attention, I assure you! Nothing like the prospect of death to put you on your toes. And Father Pat certainly had a point. If we knew that our passing was imminent, most of us would live somewhat differently. More prayer, perhaps... Or maybe, an effort to reconnect with an estranged family member... A heightened consciousness of sin... A bit more generosity...

Yes, we tend to grow complacent, don't we? We expect tomorrow to be just like today. We tend to sleepwalk through life. We tend to coast.

And that is precisely the point of today's readings. Dark as they may seem, they're intended to shake us out of our slumber. Consider our first reading from the Book of the Prophet Malachi. It promises a final reckoning. It foretells a "Day of the Lord," a dreadful 24 hours during which *"the proud and all evildoers"* will be reduced to stubble. Yikes!

And in our Gospel reading, Jesus sounds a five-alarm fire. He foretells the utter destruction of Jerusalem, a catastrophe that will take place in the year 70. Jesus is trying his best to shake his listeners out of their slumber, out of the lethargic, indifferent state that will lead – in time – to the destruction of their beloved city and the exile of the Jewish people from Israel.

And so today's homily, a reflection that draws its inspiration from today's readings... Let's call it "Deacon Dan's 'Come to Jesus' homily." And so our question: *"What would it mean to take Jesus seriously? What would it mean to enter deeply – completely, in fact – into the life of faith, into the life of true discipleship?"*

And so two hurdles we'll undoubtedly encounter along the way if we are to commit fully to the life of discipleship.

First hurdle... We have to say "yes" to Jesus. And I don't mean "yes" to Jesus, the ever-kind and ever-gentle man, or Jesus, the man of wisdom, or Jesus, the loving son of Mary. Who could say "no" to any of that.

I'm talking about Jesus, the man who claimed to be God, the prophet who forgave sins in God's name, the Jesus who raised the dead to life. And that's a stretch, isn't it? For many of us, believing in all that Jesus claimed to be is, indeed, a stretch. Consider the words of C.S. Lewis from his classic *Mere Christianity*: *"Now unless the speaker is God, the claim to forgive sins is really so preposterous as to be comic... Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give of his conduct. Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven ... This makes sense only if he really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivalled by any other character in history."*

Many of Jesus' contemporaries felt the same way, in fact. From Mark's Gospel... *"As a result of his teachings, many of Jesus' disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him."*

But some said "yes," of course. When Jesus asked his disciples, *"Do you also want to leave?"* Simon Peter answered him, *'Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.'*" Peter was all in, at least for the moment.

And the choice Peter faced is ours as well. This is the sense in which Soren Kierkegaard referred to our commitment to Jesus, the Son of God, as a "leap of faith."

Second hurdle... We have to put our faith in Jesus into action. Being a disciple of Jesus – a true disciple – is a 24/7/365 kind of thing. There are no days off. There are no mulligans. There is no such thing as a "cafeteria Christian," taking a bit of this and leaving aside a bit of that. You're either all in or you not in at all.

Consider the words of Jesus: *"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength."* And, oh yeah, you have to love your neighbor – even that crazy Samaritan who lives down the street – as you do yourself.

Now you may be thinking: *“Seriously, Dan, isn’t it enough that we go to church every Sunday? Isn’t that enough? I put my envelope in the collection basket. I’ve even given a small donation to the Archbishop’s United Catholic Appeal. How about that! But 24/7/365? Loving God with all my mind and all my strength? Loving my neighbor as myself? Isn’t that a bit extreme? Isn’t that for monks and nuns or maybe even deacons? I’m just a regular guy or gal, after all. ”* Or as one of my freshman students once told me: *“Look, Professor, I’m not a jerk, OK – most of the time anyway – and that ought to be enough”*

No, that’s not how this works. No, that’s not how any of this works. No, that’s not how true discipleship works. Consider the warning in the Book of Revelation that God issued to a small town in Turkey that didn’t take the implications of discipleship seriously: *“‘I know your deeds, Laodicea. I know that you are neither cold nor hot. How I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.’”* Oh, my!

Again, discipleship – true discipleship – is a 24/7/365 kind of thing. There are no days off. There are no mulligans. There is no such thing as a “cafeteria Christian,” taking a bit of this and leaving aside a bit of that. You’re either all in or you’re left standing on the outside.

And so “Dan’s ‘come to Jesus’ homily.”

And so, as we ponder whether or not this might, indeed, be our last Advent, we would do well, perhaps, to reflect upon the dark readings that the Church shares with us in these, the waning days of another liturgical year, and what it might mean if we pushed all of our chips into the center of the table. What it might mean if we made that leap of faith into the arms of Jesus... What it might mean, in fact, if we made this our best Advent ever...