

Homily
December 3, 2023
First Sunday of Advent
22:05 – 30:26

And so we begin a new year!

It's our liturgical year. Every year it begins and we complete it as we did last week. But as we complete it, we're not on a gerbil wheel. We're not just going around and around and around. No. We do this. (Gesturing sweeping around and forward...) It moves forward because we are moving forward in time. And each cycle of A, B and C, help us to gain insights that the Church would have us gain. But also we realize that as we have moved forward, so the truth is moving with us. And sometimes we grasp something altogether new, even though we've heard it before. It's the gift of moving forward with our God in Christ Jesus.

This particular Advent Season, we have Old Testament Readings, that in each of the four weeks focus on the Messiah or the Messianic age.

Last week we celebrated Christ the King. And we saw that that is such a unique image to grasp. A reality that is not ours, so much. Our ancestors had kings, but especially our Jewish ancestors. The greatest was David. He set the bar very high. He was to be not only a chosen figure, but was to bring peace, justice and right-living. And his descendants were to do the same. They were to live this ideal and live it for God's people.

However, the ideal figure faded over time. Sin and corruption undermined the faith and hope of the people because the sin and corruption found its first root even in the king and his family.

It was in such a context of this failure of the ideal that the whole idea of the Messiah emerged.

Messiah: the Anointed One – a figure to come as Savior of Peace, Justice and Right-living. He was the promise of hope from the time of the return from exile, from which our reading comes, to Jesus' time, who is for Christians the fulfillment of the promise of Messiah.

Our reading this morning from Isaiah is a heart-rending Psalm of entreaty and lament. It's a collection of verses stitched together by the Church, that we might reflect. It is not a continuous reading as most. It is clearly a cry for God to intervene, as in the past.

Even though they are a sinful people, they like their ancestors cry for God's saving help. They have realized – coming home to this destroyed city, to very little means by which to live – that they cannot do life on their own. They need God to make something useful out of them, for they are a sinful people. And they ask him to do that.

This would be our prayer, as well, would it not, as we begin this new liturgical year? We cannot do life on our own. And we would have our God make something useful out of us who know we are sinners.

You know, our era in history suffers from a moral infection, a spiritual disability, as it were. It's called, "self-sufficiency." We often think we can do things for ourselves, by ourselves. Do you ever have that sense?

If we just get the right breaks, we can bring meaning and fulfillment into our lives.

We think if we are holy enough, virtuous enough and religious enough, God will have to recognize our worth and confer on us the happiness we deserve.

And we have other thoughts that really tell us, "We can do it on our own." But as the pastor with whom I grew up, Father Matt Herald would have said, "Let's get our thinking straight!" And he was God's second-cousin. (Laughter) So we listened really intently.

Such self-sufficiency, my brothers and sisters, is wrong thinking.

For one thing, we are totally dependent upon God. Everything we have: our life, our faith, our talents, the support we have from others around us. It's all God's gift! It's all God's doing.

We are the clay. And God is the potter, as we heard in the reading. We can no more direct our lives for ourselves than a lump of clay can decide what shape it will assume. Add to this our own personal sinfulness.

We have all misused, at times, the gifts that God has given us. And more so, we have taken for ourselves what God intended us to use for others. And even what seems like a virtuous achievement, is often defined by selfish motives. Have you ever noticed when we think we're doing good for the perfect reason, there's something underneath it which is about me? As our reading said, "All our good deeds are like polluted rags. Our guilt carries us away like the wind."

Brothers and sisters, we need God to deliver us from this sorry state of self-sufficiency and sinfulness. We need a Messiah to bring us into harmony with God's will, with God's benevolence. This Messiah will come at the end of time.

But we also need the Messiah for our salvation and survival now.

And so let us allow our God in Christ to bring us onto the path of right-living, true fulfillment and enduring meaning. And let our need for this Saving One be our focus for this Advent.