

## Year B – 1<sup>st</sup> Week of Advent 2017

Well... today is the first week of Advent...so to those of you who speak Polish...

Szczesliwego Nowego Roku

(Shtay-sli-vego) (No-ve-go) (Ro-koo)

and for those of you who don't have a clue what I just said...Happy New Year! Yes, Happy New Year! Why? Because this week begins a new liturgical year in our Catholic faith... the first week of anticipation... the first week of watching and waiting. But what exactly are we waiting for?

Most people, I suspect, would say very simply, we're waiting for Christmas, the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. But the Gospel message this week, from St. Mark, suggests that that is not the only thing we should be waiting for. Yes, Advent does lead up to the birth of Christ, but there is something just as great, something much deeper than what we see in the malls or watch on TV. It is something that

transcends all the twinkling lights... all the holiday decorations... and all the shopping and gifts. It transcends even time itself. What we really should be anticipating, and what we really should be preparing ourselves for is the end of the age, the end of time as we know it. Advent means, “coming”, so yes we wait for the birth of Christ to come but we must also anticipate and be ready for the Lord’s second coming, or one might say his second birth.

Jesus said to his disciples, “Be watchful, be alert! You do not know when the time will come.” We are waiting for Christ to come, not only as a baby in a manger, but also as a King in the Clouds, we are waiting for our final judgement.

In the realm of our salvation, we can identify four distinct periods. The first period was from the dawn of creation until original sin, the fall of Adam and Eve. The second is the period between that original

sin and the Incarnation of the Son of God, the first Christmas. Since then we have been and still are, living in the third period – the age of the Church. Jesus spent his human years on this Earth laying the foundation for the Church by instructing and training the first Apostles. His self-sacrifice on the Cross reversed original sin and re-opened the gates of Heaven for us. He sent the Holy Spirit to guide the Apostles and their successors, our bishops, who shepherd us, the children of God. The Gospel reminds us that as his servants, we are to take care of his household, the Church, until he returns. Jesus came to Earth on Christmas as a baby in a manger, and the Lord will come again at the end of time, which may happen tomorrow, it may happen next year, it may not happen for another 1000 years...the reality is that we just don't know. But, when it does happen, that fourth period will begin.

What exactly does this mean? Are we to prepare ourselves for an Armageddon, total devastation? I

don't believe so, and that is not what the Church teaches. It tells us that Heaven and Earth as we now know it will pass away... it will be changed. Evil will be banished forever and those who lived and died in complete friendship with Christ will enter into their everlasting reward.

What are we waiting for? A time when the Lord's love will prevail over all the Earth and there will be peace on Earth... that's what we are waiting for. Advent is a time for searching and preparing our hearts to receive the Lord as our Savior, as the Prince of Peace. We are waiting for the Second Coming of God's only Son, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel."

We live in a world that is bound by the chains of sin and a cloud of darkness. Advent is our reminder that those chains will, one day be broken. Even in the darkness and coldest days, we will one day

know and see the light of Christ. Candle by candle, flame by flame, there is and always will be hope.

Maybe our most familiar and universal symbol of hope is the Advent wreath, which Christians have been using for more than 1000 years. The circular shape of the wreath gives it no beginning or end. It symbolizes perfectly, the eternity of God, His endless love and, His everlasting life. The evergreen branches represent that even during the coldest and darkest days of winter, they will remain green, signs of life. The holly leaves are bordered with small prickly edges, giving us a gentle reminder of Christ's crown of thorns, a gentle reminder of the suffering by which he won victory over sin and evil.

The four candles represent the four weeks of Advent. There are some traditions that say they represent the four thousand years that Christians believed passed between the fall of Adam and Eve, and the birth of Jesus. It is the light of these candles that represent Christ himself. He is the true light of the world whose Word shows us how to

live, and who's continual love is expressed in the Eucharist.

The gradual lighting of these four candles throughout Advent, reminds us that Christ's joy of salvation doesn't come all at once. Life as a Catholic Christian is a journey and has to constantly be renewed, just as a new candle is lit each week. The colors of the candles have significant meaning as well. The violet or purple is a reminder that during Advent, not only are we preparing for the coming of Christ, but that it is also a time for penance, to turn back to God and ask for His forgiveness. The rose-colored candle is lit on the third week of Advent, referred to as Gaudete Sunday, which means, "rejoice". And, we should be rejoicing that week because the coming of Jesus is only a week away. We remember how that joy came into the world over 2000 years ago. How his joy continues to make itself known to a seeking and struggling world.

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and Catholic theologian, once wrote that there are three comings of Christ... first when he was born... the second is NOW...right now! He is here among us every day. The third is when he returns at the end of time. But will we recognize him when he does come? Will he recognize us?

There is a Canadian sculptor whose name is Timothy Schmalz. While walking one afternoon in downtown Toronto, he noticed a homeless person lying on a park bench, perfectly still, and shrouded in a blanket. He said, "It was actually a shock to me to see in the middle of the afternoon, in the middle of one of the busiest downtown areas, this human figure, perfectly still amongst all the noise and commotion ... it jolted me."

This experience was etched in his mind, and for the entire next year he couldn't stop thinking about it. He decided that if he were to recreate the human figure in a bronze sculpture, that maybe... just

maybe, he could stop thinking about it. Schmalz began sculpting and casting the human life size figure in his studio. It would be a human figure that could be placed on a bench, similar to what he saw. It would be a work of art that would remind people of the blight of the homeless and the conditions they deal with. One of his first completed works went to Indianapolis and was installed in a downtown park. Being a new edition to the park, people who frequented the park regularly were startled. They began making calls to 911, thinking that someone was in need of help, or even worse was dead. And, of course there were those who chose to ignore and just walked past the site. When the first 911 call came in reporting the “homeless person on the bench”, the police were dispatched to investigate. Once the responding officers arrived, they cautiously approached the figure, not aware that it was a sculpture. But once they got close enough they came to the realization that it was a work of art, a work so realistic, even the well-trained eye was fooled.



But, there is one more interesting detail about the bronze sculpture. When you look at the still figure lying on the bench, shrouded in a blanket, you can see that only his feet are exposed. And, on those bronze sculpted feet are two nail marks, symbolizing the two nail marks that our Lord Jesus Christ received while being nailed to the cross.

You see, this sculpture in reality is a “homeless Jesus.” .....(pause)

The message being conveyed to us through this work of art is that we don't know how Jesus will come when he returns to this world. We do know that he came as an infant. But, we don't know if his second coming will be as a King coming out of the clouds or if HE will show up as a homeless man on a park bench?

Dorothy Day once said, “you never know when one of them might be Christ. He might be at your dinner table, in your office, you might step over him in the street. We wait for Christ the King to return

in glory ... yes ... but how often do we meet... Christ the Lonely... Christ the Poor... Christ the Forgotten. How often do we see him and never recognize him.”

No matter where or how we will encounter Christ, we need to prepare ourselves. We need to make ourselves ready for his ultimate coming, and we need to make ourselves worthy of him.

And so, in the middle of the darkest time of the year, we turn towards this wreath with four candles, we turn towards a bright star over Bethlehem. As Christmas approaches we watch it grow brighter and closer, and we strive in whatever way we can to make our lives be a reflection of that light.

That is Advent. A time to prepare, to renew, and to reflect about what is to come.

What are we waiting for? Who are we waiting for?

Let's use these next four weeks of Advent to recognize not only that baby in the manger, but also that King coming in all his splendor and glory.

(Shtay-sli-vego) (No-ve-go) (Ro-koo)

Happy New Year!

Praise be Jesus Christ – Now and For Ever