

## **First Sunday of Advent, Year B**

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8

Psalm 79

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:33-37

It's become almost a cliché for us to complain about how early the shops put up their Christmas decorations, but I think this tendency in our culture reveals something deeper than just a desire for shops to sell as much stuff as possible.

The question of when to decorate the house for Christmas has become a bit of a contentious issue for some Catholics. As you may know, Advent is essentially divided into two sections, both connected to the theme of the Lord's arrival. During the first part of Advent, the readings and prayers of the Church's liturgy focus on the Lord's return among us at the end of time, whereas from the 17th of December onwards the liturgy turns to focus more concretely on the commemoration of the Lord's birth 2,000 years ago.

As such, in some parts of the world, the decorating of the tree is delayed until this second part of Advent, while I'm told that in Poland, the tree only gets decorated on Christmas Eve. For our part here in the parish, while our Christmas trees adorn the sanctuary from the start of Advent, we only turn on their lights on Christmas Eve, in a nod to the distinction between Advent and Christmastide.

I would imagine that most non-Catholics—and indeed, many Catholics as well—don't realise that the theme of the end of time is part of the lead-up to Christmas, but I for one think that this focus is a worthwhile thing. We are not made simply for the here and now. We pass through this world as pilgrims, on our way to our place in eternity with the one who made us.

Our culture tends to be obsessed with its own moment, as if those of us here and now are the first and last chapter in history – a phenomenon that some call “the arrogance of the present moment”. As such, until recently, any discussion of the “end of the world” has generally been seen as the reserve of cranks and loonies. However, in more recent times, end-of-the-world discussion has gained steam, as can be seen in many of the popular songs and films of the last decade or so. Environmental concerns, along with increasing social polarisation and indeed demonisation, has led to a general existential angst among many, with increasing depression and despair being one of the associated fruits.

In the face of all this, you could argue that the world would benefit from the seeing the Church spend some time spent thinking—in a good way—about the end of time. Indeed, the Church's invitation for us to be joyful, expectant witnesses to eternity is something really quite profound, and rather needed in our day and age.

I think it also bears observing that one of the reasons why Advent is increasingly celebrated as Christmas in our culture is that we're not very good at doing anticipation anymore as a society. We need everything now, but, ironically, we cannot savour anything for more than a moment either. In other words, we can't stand waiting for things, and when they finally arrive, instead of taking time to enjoy them, we tend to shift our focus onto the next thing we want.

The Church's delay in decorating for Christmas compared with the culture around us makes a lot more sense, and seems a lot less dour, if we celebrate all of Christmastide with appropriate gusto – if we remain festive throughout the full Christmas octave, and indeed for the full twelve nights leading up to Epiphany. And yet, as we know, in many places the decorations are all down within a couple of days of Christmas morning, and certainly by New Year's Eve.

The phenomena of being too quick to start and too soon to finish the celebration of Christmas can seem ironic, even paradoxical. But you could argue that they are really two sides to the same coin.

As I said at the outset, it's almost a cliché to harp on about how stores loop through the holidays in a push to sell us seasonally branded merchandise months in advance of any particular day. Christmas-themed merch is out in stores by September at the latest. Then, about thirty seconds into the New Year, back-to-school and Valentine's Day merch is being flogged, followed the secular take on Easter, and so on, until the whole cycle reboots (the increasing push of celebrating an American-style Halloween here in Australia is but a part of all this).

Now, the general consensus is that all of this is driven by commercial interests wanting to sell us more and more stuff, but I suspect there's a deeper psychology behind why folks go along with it.

Secular society needs holidays, and lacking any of its own, it takes Christian feasts and mashes them into socially acceptable forms. But underneath it all is a kind of frantic existential panic, the need to be focusing on something next, to move instantly from one focus to another – anything to avoid the terrifying void that gapes at the centre of a society without eternity, without God – anything to distract us from the giant question about the purpose and meaning of our fleeting human existence. In short, ours is a culture that constantly demands the next thing to avoid thinking about the last things.

As you've perhaps heard me say before, I was struck by what took place in our society for a fleeting few weeks at the start of the Covid lockdowns. The reality of our mortality was suddenly front and centre, and our usual distractions were taken away – sport was gone, we couldn't go shopping – it was as though the whole world was going through a collective near-death-experience. Some of the conversations I had with folks, and some of the confessions I heard during that time, were quite profound, as some people stopped to consider big-picture questions for the first time in decades.

Then of course, the Black Lives Matter phenomenon emerged, the vaccine politics kicked in, and the circle of distractions ramped back up, because heaven-forbid we stay reflecting upon our mortality for any longer than is absolutely necessary.

In the face of our culture's frenetic distractions from such things, and in the face of the despair and hopelessness of those who do contemplate the idea of environmental and societal collapse, we Christians have to audacity to proclaim that all of our lives, all of human history, and indeed the whole of creation, are pointed toward an eventual climax which we are meant to witness to with hope and joyful expectancy. The grace to do so with a truly Christian disposition can serve as an antidote to our wider culture, for whom waiting—for anything—is so difficult.

Christ's coming into the world was not only the fulfilment of God's promise to Israel – it was also the fulfilment of the hope of every human heart that ever longed for peace or the presence of something *more*. And the season of Advent not only prepares us to recall Christ's coming as a child, but it also prepares us to anticipate his glorious return at the end of time. Our Lord and Saviour is *still* the fulfilment of every human heart, and he comes to invite us all into the peace and unity of his kingdom, where he reigns for all eternity.