

SUNDAY REFLECTION

Every year around this time, I reflect on the distinction between preparing for the *holiday* of Christmas and preparing for the *holy day*. Preparations for the holiday have already begun. Christmas decorations are adorning the stores, and shoppers are listening to Christmas music. People are buying gifts and looking for the best deal, whether it's in a store or online. Trips and visits are planned, and menus for Christmas dinner are getting set. This Sunday marks the beginning of the season of Advent, and the time of preparation for the holy day of Christmas, when we celebrate the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ, into the world, and wait for Him to come again. Both kinds of preparation can be positive. I still enjoy giving and receiving gifts. I enjoy hearing about how friends and family are decorating their homes or getting ready to bake dozens (hundreds!) of Christmas cookies.

When we look at what's going on in the world, or in our lives, the preparation to celebrate Jesus' birth and to await His coming again becomes more and more important. Advent is a time of waiting, but not passive waiting. We are to get ready. As Jesus says in our Gospel reading from Matthew, "Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come."

How are we to get ready? In our second reading from Romans, St. Paul exhorts his fellow Christians: "You know the time; it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep. For our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed; the night is advanced, the day is at hand. Let us then throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." To get ready for the day when Jesus comes, we are called to get *out* of certain things ("the works of darkness"), and get *into* others ("the armor of light").

Our Scripture readings point to some of the "works of darkness" that are all around us, and keep us from the "peace" and "good will among all" that this time of year calls to mind. In our first reading from Isaiah, we hear the prophet look forward to a time when "One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again." Violence is a work of darkness that has proven difficult for us to throw off. So often we seem to turn to violence almost as a first, rather than as a last resort. In the reading from Romans, St. Paul writes, "let us conduct ourselves...not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and lust, not in rivalry and jealousy." Another work of darkness that seems prevalent is self-indulgence. We are tempted to want more and more and more, despite the consequences to others or even to the whole earth.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus points to another work of darkness. He says, "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. In those days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day that Noah entered the ark. They did not know until the flood came and carried them all away." For me, Jesus warns against complacency. In some ways, this can be the most seductive work of darkness of all. We can be tempted to let our comfort determine our attitude toward others and to the world. As Christians, we can never be satisfied with what is. When it comes to the environment or poverty or violence, we really can't wait to "conduct ourselves properly as in the day" (Romans 13:13), or beat our "swords into plowshares," and our "spears into pruning hooks" (Isaiah 2:4)! We are called to act at this time in our lives!

We cannot throw off the works of darkness on our own. As St. Paul says, we are to put on "the armor of light." We are to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." Only in the grace and love of Jesus Christ can we let go of violence and self-indulgence and complacency. In sharing Jesus' love we can work for peace and justice in our world. To paraphrase the words of Isaiah, we are being called: "O Church, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

May God continue to bless us all, and may we prepare ourselves for Christ's coming.

In Christ,

Fr. Phil, CP