

"Not Then and When, But Here and Now"

Homily of December 1, 2002

by Fr. Brian Joyce

This weekend, we begin the season of Advent, a season of people longing for the light. I have to tell you the truth. Advent is my favorite season. And there are a number of reasons for it. The number one reason why advent is my favorite season (Maybe you can guess!) is because it is the shortest of the seasons. You know, Lent is seven weeks. Easter is seven weeks. Ordinary time is 32 - 33 weeks. Advent is just right for me, four weeks. That's just about right.

It is also my favorite because I think, besides being short, it is also very necessary. The holiday time, this time of year, is supposed to be a time for peace, a time for spiritual growth and reflection, a time for concern for one another. And we get so hectic and tied up with shopping and writing Christmas cards and gift-wrapping and decorating. We just get blown away from spirituality, from peace, from real concern for our world and one another. Just take for example, Friday. Friday blew me away! I mean, look at our Planet Earth, this world, and think of all the issues around peace, going on right now. Think of all the difficulties and problems. Think of all the challenges. Think of all the news that we should know about if we are going to be concerned about peace and concerned for others. Every hour, every news report on every channel was about how many people were shopping at Toys R Us, or at the Mall, and interviewing Joe Doaks to ask him if he were going to buy more or fewer gifts this Christmas. Now, I know the retailers have their issues and the economy is a problem, but give me a break! This is too much, really just too much! So, we need a focus like Advent.

We need a season that brings us back to what is really important. So, I like Advent because it is short, because it is necessary. And also it is very natural. I think it is because of the short days and the long nights and the darkness. We end up looking for light. We end up turning on lights. We end up decorating with lights. We end up longing for the light. I don't think it is just a coincidence that the three major world religions have big celebrations of light during this time. The Muslim world is celebrating Ramadan, and they will be coming to the close of it in December. They celebrate the Night of Power when the Koran was received. And they end up with a celebration of the breaking of the fast where they exchange gifts with one another as a sign of concern. The Jewish people began, Friday, Hanukkah and the Festival Lights and the lighting of the Menorah, and they will finish that with an exchange of gifts as a sign of their concern for one another. We Christians have our Advent wreath out in the lobby, lighting one week after another, for four weeks, leading up to Christmas and the exchange of gifts, a sign of concern for one another. It is not a coincidence that it's this time of year that we all do this.

I am sure you have noticed what our environment committee put up as a reminder that we are a people longing for the light. I looked at it and the first thing I said was, "How many lights are there?" And they said, "Nine." I said, "Everyone is going to ask me what is the symbolism of nine lights. Why nine?" They said, "Well the distance from up there (pointing to the ceiling) to down there was just about right for nine lights." I said, "What am I going to do? People are going to ask about the symbolism." They replied, "Don't worry about it. You will think of something." So, I thought about the nine First Fridays. I don't think that will do. What about Catholic novenas? I don't think that will do it. Then, it dawned on me that the menorah, for Hanukkah, is nine lights. It might remind us of our Jewish roots, our salvation history. So, you can think of that or you can think it is just the right size. It just fits. Whatever you want to think of.

But we do need light. There is more than enough darkness to go around. There is the downturn of the economy that is hurting a lot of people. Did you see in the news, two weeks ago, in the South Bay, they had the opening of 158 jobs, and they advertised the applications, and 6000 people showed up? Or come by our front door any day of the week and see the line upon line of families and individuals, coming for food, for clothing, for shelter. There is darkness enough to go around. Or we think of the terrorism going on in our world, the suicide-bombers. It is not safe. There is darkness enough to go around. Or we think of the impending war, what looks like that in Iraq, and the danger that is to our young men and women, and especially for the young people of Iraq. There is enough darkness to go around. Or, we think of individual lives. It is very difficult at holidays for some people. They are away from family. They are lonely. They don't have any family with them. It makes it very hard. Or, others have a lot of resentment, and what makes it very hard is that they come together, and they have to come together at holidays. And they find that difficult. And we have had sickness, cancer. We have had some terrible deaths, a fifteen-year-old boy, a forty-year-old mother. There is a lot of darkness going on. If we are to be people longing for the light, it means that we are people who still have hope in the face of the darkness, aren't afraid to look at the darkness and say it is there, and be people who try to take some action and make some kind of a change. I think that is what it means to be people longing for the light, people who long for the light and pass on the light.

Now, the meaning of today's gospel.... Jesus says, "Be watchful. Be alert." The message of Jesus today: He says, "Watch." I think there is a little danger in there what we watch for. Are we watching for Christmas, that that is coming? Is that what it is? Are we watching for something that happened back then? Or are we watching way into the future, something that is going to come but we don't know when? I think both of those are mistaken, for Christian people to be worrying about what happened back then or waiting for what may happen some day. I think Christian belief, and the light, is not about the past or the future. It's about now. It's about here and now.

The danger is we look at Christmas and say, "Oh, we are concerned and preparing for

what happened back then." Christmas is one event, two thousand years ago. But that is not really what Christmas is. Christmas uncovers, in the person of Jesus, what God has been about since the beginning of the Universe, and is about and doing right now, that our God is near. It is not the celebration of a visit, once upon a time, of an extraterrestrial to our planet. It is not the visit of our God, dropping in, staying for thirty-three years, and then saying, "See you later." It is God, walking with us, and along with us, and breaking through in the person of Jesus Christ, and inviting us to find His light, His values, and His wisdom, and be light to one another, to shine His light with comfort and with hope, and to try to change our world. So, the danger is, when we are told to watch, the danger is we watch for what happened back then. We are supposed to watch for what is happening here and now.

The other danger is we watch for what is going to come down the road. When it happens, we want to be ready. When it happens! OK. It is in the Bible and it is in our Creed, belief in the second coming of Jesus. And we even say in the Creed, "I believe that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead." OK, I believe that. But I want to tell you, personally, I have no intention and I don't think for a moment that I will be around for it. I mean that is way off. We should have a sense, as the early Church did, that it is about to happen because Jesus says not only, "Watch and be alert," but He also says, "The Kingdom of God is within you." The Kingdom of God is at hand. You have to recognize it right now. That is why we have to be so attentive. I mean, the second coming, whenever, however it happens, I think that is way down the road and we are all going to miss it. And it doesn't matter, just so we don't miss here and now.

Just think about the history of our Universe for a moment. Our Universe is somewhere between thirteen and fifteen billion years old, give or take a couple of billion years. Is that rough enough? If you put that together in a cosmic calendar of one year, we would have just arrived a few seconds ago. Or, let's say it is a book with God's story of God's people. (Someone has worked this out for me.) The book is a thousand pages long, up to now, and on every page there are forty lines and every line has ten words, and every word is five letters long. If you work this out, the history of our Universe, you go to page 1000, the middle of line 39, and you get the first human being. We got a long way to go!

It's not watching for what may happen in the distant future, when we say, "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again." It is Christ present to us here and now. And our task is to recognize the presence and the work of God and walk with our God here and now, to make out the presence of our God in the darkness, to find the presence of our God in our difficulties, to rest in and treasure the presence of God in our doubts, and to long for the light and look for the light and to pass it on. Now, how do we do that? I think we do it by how we think about our world, how we care about our world, and how we treat our world. I think we do it by how we think about one another, how

we care for one another, how we treat one another. I think that's how we find the light, pass on the light, follow the light. Jesus says to us, "I am the Light. Take My hand. Follow the Light."

You know, the day after September 11th and the tragedy at the World Trade Center and in the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania, **John McCutcheon**, the folk singer who joined us here twice in the last couple of years, was in an airport, waiting to go to his next performance, and, of course, nothing was flying. So he had to drive about nine hours and, as he drove, **the day after September 11th, he wrote this song:**

There is a hole in our skyline.

There is a hole in our town.

There is a hole in our hearts,

The whole world around.

How do we heal?

Tell me how do we see

The mercy that shines in you and me?

We follow the light.

When the world feels so big

And we seem so small

And you wonder

If life has any meaning at all

When you're losing your heart

And you are losing the fight

Hold onto my hand

And follow the light

That is what Jesus, the Lord Messiah, says to us. "Hold onto My way. Hold onto My hand. And follow the light. Amen.

