

1st SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The dominant idea in today's readings is the second coming of Christ and the end of the world – not unlike last week's celebration of the Feast of Christ the King. It probably did not seem unusual that we should consider those things on the last Sunday of the year, but why would we do that at the start of the new year.

At the start of her liturgical year the Church invites us to embark on a great journey – to follow the footsteps of Christ in all his mysteries so that we may live as he lived. Now if you want people to embark on a journey you have to give them some idea of the goal of that journey. And a vague shadowy goal is not much use. It must be real, concrete and desirable. That's why on this day the Church directs our eyes towards the end, towards the second coming of Christ.

I found myself focusing on the empty crib. That seems to me to be a kind of metaphor for the way many of us are feeling these days. I reckon there's a lot of fear in the air just now. A kind of emptiness. I know that some of us are fearful for the future of the Church in Australia – that became pretty obvious in our gathering to formulate a parish submission for the 2020 Plenary Council. I know that many are also concerned about the future shape and leadership of our own parish after the middle of next year. Many have very personal fears – how to confront the pain or the loneliness of old age, perhaps. Or having to face the reality of family violence or separation.

Let's just take a few moments to focus on the empty crib and name the fears and emptiness in our own life. (Pause)

You know, the world into which Jesus was born was not unlike what we experience today. People trying to make sense of a religion where too many of their leaders were over concerned with their own authority and power and would not lift a finger to help the poor and needy. A world where the people were feeling that since the death of the last of the Old Testament prophets God was no longer revealing himself to his people. A feeling of abandonment !

So if the empty crib is a metaphor for our human condition, how might we deal with it ?

In some contrast to the agitation and fear that we experience, the scripture provides us with promise and hope. Jeremiah reminds us of the promise

that God made to his people – *“Judah shall be saved and Israel shall dwell in confidence”*.

There’s another way of looking at the empty crib. It also speaks of hope and trust and confidence. It invites us to wait patiently for the coming of the one who would “set his people free”. How and when that might happen we do not know. Only God knows. So we shouldn’t believe those who claim to have inside information. We know that it will happen. We have Christ’s word for that. That should be enough. We live in hope. What is uncertain is not the coming of Christ but our readiness and capacity to *“go forth to meet him”*.

St Paul gives us a programme. He tells us to *“live the life that God wants, as you have learned from me.”* First and foremost he places the command to love and care for our fellow Christians in the community of the Church. Then we are to reach out to others. As St John of the Cross put it: *“In the evening of life we shall be examined on love.”* With faith and hope and love we can look forward with confidence. Christ urged his disciples not to fear his coming, but to look forward to it. He said *“Stand erect, hold up your heads, for the time of your liberation is close at hand”*. Why should we not look forward in joyful hope to the definitive and complete victory of Christ our King over the powers of evil ?

The last day will be a day of triumph for Christ and his true followers, a spring time of liberation and salvation. How strange that all the false prophets when they speak of the end speak of gloom, doom and damnation. But they are wrong. The love and mercy of God are at the very heart of the Good News preached by Christ.

But we cannot live in the future. The future is in God’s hands. The present is in ours. We have to get on with our christian work. But the risen Christ is at our side to encourage us and give us hope. In the words of Albert Camus, *“In the midst of winter I find myself an invincible spring.”*