

1st Sunday of Advent
December 3, 2017
Holy Spirit (SH/HT)

Is 63:16b-17, 19b, 64:2-7
I Cor 1:3-9
Mk 13:33-37

I. This past week a mother shared with me a conversation she had with her three year old daughter:

- on the way to school, the mother prayed the Morning Offering from the Apostleship of Prayer
- when finished, she asked her three-year old if there was anything she wanted to pray for
- the girl responded, "God"
- the mother replied, "You mean you want to pray to God."
- "Yes!" the little girl replied.
- the mother asked what she would want to say to God and the girl responded, "Please come back."

How's that for a homily from a three-year old?!

II. Do you ever want to say to God, "Please come back?"

- this is the prayer of ancient Israel as expressed in the words of the prophet Isaiah
- the people are fully aware they have sinned and strayed far from God
- they have done wicked deeds and hardened their hearts
- they recognize the consequences of their sin: they have become unclean, their good deeds are like polluted rags, they are like leaves blowing about in the wind
- and so they pray: "Return for the sake of your servants!" In other words, please come back!
- the reading is a communal lament: the prayer of people who feel lost, abandoned, oppressed, adrift like a ship without a rudder

III. As we come to Advent 2017, do we have anything to lament about? Are there any problems or issues weighing heavily upon us?

- sit down in front of the evening news and take notes! Or read the first three pages of the newspaper and take notes. Within minutes you will have a page full of "laments," – crimes of abuse, murder, theft; issues of violence, threats of war, destruction of the environment, insane political rhetoric and so on....
- add to that our own personal issues: health concerns, stresses in family life, problems at work, worries about the future...
- we do not lack laments – whether it is our *own* sin which causes a mess in our lives or the sins of others foisted upon us...and we want to cry out! O God, please come back!

IV. The prayer of lament was an established part of Jewish prayer, but it never really carried forward in Christian prayer – and we Catholic often times feel uncomfortable with this type of prayer: somehow we think it is wrong to complain to God. God is all good, so how can we complain to God?

But where else would an oppressed, worried, stressed people go – but to the good God who calls us to hope? The prayer of Isaiah turns to the goodness of God: “You, O Lord, are our father; we are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands.”

In the midst of our lamentation, so should we also turn to God’s goodness.

V. Jesus’ advice about that is: Be watchful! Be alert!

I guess the image that comes to my mind – when thinking about all these laments - is that it’s like walking around in a sewer: a place that is filthy, stinky, filled with disease. We can’t stay there: we have to get out of the sewer – we have move beyond the laments and embrace God’s goodness. We want to get to a point where we no longer pray, “Please come back!” because we recognize how God is present. That is precisely the call of Advent: be watchful!

VI. So, how to be watchful?

- find times for silence. Sneak it in where possible...while out driving...turn off the radio...use that time for prayer. Find out quiet times during the day...a few minutes here, a few minutes there...
- listen while praying. It is just a matter of praying – but pay attention. What are the insights which come to you in prayer? The stray ideas? The intuitions? The spontaneous sense to act.
- notice God’s presence in the warm smile of a stranger.
- a card from someone you have heard from for a long time, a surprise gift, a sudden gesture of kindness, an inspiring song on the radio, a warm Christmas program, the laughter of children – God is present to us – not in big splashy ways, but in the beauty and simplicity of everyday life.
- or what are those inclinations you have to be that messenger of kindness with a gift, a card, a phone call, an invitation to coffee, whatever.... God may be present to us in *our* deeds of kindness and goodness towards others.

VII. We may well be depressed by the sorrows of lamentation, but Advent calls us to look forward to a day of peace and reconciliation. St. Paul reminds us to use the gifts we have been given to live faithfully in this world – and we can do that! By being watchful and patient we know God is *always* present.

(Fr. Dwayne Thoman)