

First Sunday - Advent - Cycle B

Today is the 1st Sunday in the season of Advent, the beginning of a new Church year. The word Advent means "coming."... For Christians it refers to the Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ into the world,.. both His 1st coming as a human baby born in the backwater town of Bethlehem ...& His glorious 2nd Coming as Christ the King at the end of the world....On the 1st Sunday of Advent, the Gospel readings always center on the 2nd Coming of Jesus Christ, reminding us that we don't know when or how it will happen,...& so we need to be continually prepared for His return. That's the theme of my homily this am/pm.

But, before I start, I want to tell you, I'm a big football fan,...and recently I was very insulted when a sports commentator said that most football fans are fat and stupid...Well, I am NOT fat!...The stupid part,...well maybe sometimes...Like when I 1st looked at today's Gospel, and it made me think of the Buffalo Bills Quarterback problems...It's not as stupid as it sounds...If you bear with me, hopefully you'll see the connection. ...Every team has at least two Quarterbacks. ...A starting Quarterback, and a backup Quarterback. The job of the starting Quarterback is to go out on the field and help his team get TDs...What's the job of the backup Quarterback?...His job is to BE READY!To be ready...The backup Quarterback watches while the starting Quarterback plays in the game....The backup Quarterback never knows when he is going to be sent into the game...So, he has to be ready when the coach calls...If he isn't ready because he hasn't worked hard enough,...and he goes into the game and does a lousy job, what happens? ...He gets sent down to the practice squad.

Now, let's look at what Jesus says to His disciples in our Gospel. ...He warns them: "be watchful, be ready, ...because you don't know when the time will come."...Jesus was talking about being alert, being ready for His 2nd coming at the end of time,...the day or hour of which no one knows except God the Father....Jesus wants His disciples - and that includes you and me - to be ready when He comes at the end of the world, ...or at the end of our life, whichever happens first ...He warns us to be ready because He doesn't want to find us unfaithful, unworthy when He comes. He wants to bring us to heaven with Him!

Do you see the connection?...The backup Quarterback has to be ready when the coach calls him...If he isn't ready because he didn't work hard enough, down he goes...We have to be ready when Jesus - our coach- calls us...If we're not ready because we haven't worked hard enough,...down we go...But there's one BIG difference...If the backup Quarterback is sent down to the practice squad,...he has a chance to work hard and get back onto the team...If we're not ready when Jesus calls,...it's too late. ...we can't work our way back onto His team... Our merciful God, gives us chance after chance to get ourselves ready, until our dying breath...But as we heard from Jesus in last Sunday's Gospel, once we're standing in judgment before Christ the King,...there are no do-overs...We better be ready.

So, how can we work hard enough to be ready so that when Jesus comes for us, He will find us faithful and worthy? ...I believe the best way to prepare for His coming is to live in constant awareness of that great mystery of our faith,...that even though Jesus has come once and then left,.. and we now await His coming again,...He is still here with us...He's here speaking to us in the sacred words of the Gospel, as He did just a while ago...He is here in His precious Body

and Blood that give us strength and life.....And most importantly, Jesus told us that He is present in every needy person,.. every hungry person, every suffering person,... every lonely person,... every outcast,... every struggling person that we encounter in our lives...And He told us that how we treat them is how we are treating Him...The best way for us to be ready for Jesus when He comes for us,... is to stay awake to the Jesus who is here with us, among us every day, needing our love and our care.

Tony Campolo is a well known Christian leader....You can tell by his name – he's a paizan'. Not that that's important...Just sayin'...This is Tony telling about an experience that changed his life:

I was walking down the street in Philadelphia on my way to a meeting, and a bum comes walking towards me.... I mean a dirty, smelly guy with a scraggly beard that had pieces of rotted food stuck to it... As he came up to me, he held out a cup of McD's coffee and said, "Hey, want some of my coffee?" ...I looked at this dirty man and tried not to cringe as I answered, "Thanks, but that's ok," ..& I walked away... A minute after I passed him, I knew I was doing the wrong thing, so I turned and walked back to him and said,.. "Excuse me. I will have some of your coffee."...So I took the cup, barely sipped it, and gave it back to him,... Then I said, "You're very generous. How come you're sharing your coffee?"

The bum looked at me and said, "Because the coffee tastes especially good today, and I think that when God gives you something good, you ought to share it with people."...I didn't know how to handle that, so I said, "Can I give you anything?"...I figured he was going to hit me for five bucks...At first, he said, "No, thanks."...But then, he said, "Yeah, I changed my mind, there is something you can give me... You can give me a hug."...I was hoping for the five bucks !...He put his arms around me, and I put mine around him...The smell of alcohol, sweat and urine was so bad I had to hold my breath...& as we hugged one another there on the street, I had this strange awareness that I wasn't hugging a bum. ...I was hugging Jesus...I had found Jesus in that dirty, lonely man,...and I had almost walked away.

In His sermon on the Last Judgment, Jesus left no doubt that our eternal destiny will depend **above all** on how we treat the hungry,...the naked,...the broken, ..the poor, ...the prisoner, ...the stranger,...& we can add to that the druggie, the drunk, the disturbed, ...the weak,...the outcast, and the forgotten...Jesus said, "Whatever you do for these least of my brothers and sisters, you do for Me." ..."Whatever you do NOT do for these least of my brothers and sisters, you do NOT do for Me."

It's as if Jesus was saying... "You see that raggedy man digging for cans and bottles in that dumpster? ..That's Me....You see that lonely shut-in longing for someone to talk to?...That's Me...You see that immigrant struggling to make a home in a strange land? That's Me...You see who's lying in bed #17 in the homeless shelter?...That's Me...You see that single mom with her baby in line at the Soup Kitchen? That's Me...You see that kid who sits by himself every day in the cafeteria? ..That's Me...And that helpless little one growing in his mother's belly,..That's Me."

My friends, whenever we meet a needy person, a suffering person, a forgotten person... we will find that it's Jesus waiting and wanting to be loved in that person...When we reach out to a person in need,...when we embrace someone who is hurting, .. when we minister to someone

who is going through hard times,...we will become strangely and wonderfully aware - as Tony Campolo did - that it's Jesus coming right back at us through that person... If Tony had kept walking past that bum,...he would have missed a hug from Jesus...At the end of my life,...I don't want Jesus reminding me of how often I walked past Him, ...because I may miss a whole lot more...I may miss an eternity of hugs from Jesus.

I WANT an eternity of hugs from Jesus, so starting today – the 1st day of Advent - I'm going to try to remember to pray this simple prayer to the Holy Spirit at the start of every day,...& I invite you to do the same:...“Holy Spirit, if I see someone in need today, remind me that it's Jesus, and please keep my feet from walking past Him.”... AMEN!