

Be alert! Stay awake! The Master of the house is coming! The Lord our God will soon be with us, how do we prepare? How does this Gospel, which speaks to the end of time, help us through Advent as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus? How do we integrate the apocalypse and the Advent Season in our hearts and in our prayers? One event we perceive as absolutely terrifying, the other event as preparation for a celebration of joy in a conflicted and confusing world.

To start, both events center on preparing for Our Lord Jesus Christ coming to earth. At that very first Christmas his birth changed the very nature of nature itself because God made flesh had never walked the face of the earth before. Keep in mind that whatever, whomever God touches is changed and can never return to what was before the infusion of God's grace.

If we want to wrestle with this concept in our hearts, we can start with Baptism. In the reception of the primordial sacrament, we become adopted children of God. God has touched us through the grace of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament, removed Original Sin and left an indelible mark on our souls, changing our very nature once and forever.

When we pass from this Earth, it makes no difference when we die if the world continues without us, or the world dies with us, the end result is the same. Our very nature is changed from physical to spiritual as we meet with Jesus Christ. From that meeting we will either find ourselves on a route to heaven or to that other place depending upon our thoughts, words and actions on this earthly plain. Our thoughts, words and actions are the point of intersection, the place where the beginning, Advent preparing for Christmas and the end, our death meet.

Our preparation to receive Jesus at Christmas should be the same as we prepare for Jesus to receive us at the moment of our death. As we struggle and run away, trying to avoid the obvious, eventually we have to admit that the only acceptable gift to the Jesus on his birthday is the same gift we will present to him at our death, ourselves. We are the only gift that he desires. Harkin back to the words of the 51st Psalm, "My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit; a contrite, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn." (*Ps 51:19*)

Throughout the Old and New Testament God makes it clear; the one, the only gift that he wants is us. He wants us while we are here on this earth, he wants us with him forever in heaven. On our part, we are all in when it comes to spending eternity with Jesus, Mary and all the Saints in heaven, as long as it is on our own schedule, and as long as we get to prepare, or not, as we desire while here on this earth.

As much as Jesus wants us to join him at the heavenly banquet, it doesn't quite work that way. Jesus has paid the price for our salvation, he has opened the gates, but he still requires that we make an effort to show that we are sincerely interested in our own salvation. These efforts become our gifts to the Christ Child on his birthday and essential elements of our preparation to meet him in heaven.

Let us take a minute to put together a recommended gift list from us to Jesus on his birthday. We need to start with things to give. This last Monday the Gospel reading was the story of the Widow who gave her last 2 small coins, her entire livelihood to the Temple Treasury. (*Lk 21:1-4*) She withheld nothing back from God. Not all of us are called to pour out everything, but we are all called to pour out something to the point that it makes us a bit uncomfortable. Treasure is an essential part of it and Fr. Gaul and I are most grateful for your continuing financial support, but Jesus is asking for more than our treasure.

The most finite resource we have is time. No matter how we try, there are only 60 seconds in a minute, 60 minutes in an hour and 24 hours in a day. How much of that time goes to God in the form of prayer, works of mercy or in evangelization? We are called to do all three, but how often does the TV, games or other entertainment take precedence over the gift of our time to Our Lord?

Then God in his wisdom and mercy has given all of us talents. Are we using them for the sake of the Kingdom, or are we sitting on them, afraid to use them because... We are all capable of filling in our own excuses and they are legion. However, we have these skills, these talents for a purpose and that purpose is for our salvation and the salvation of others. How terrible would it be to stand before Jesus and see the faces of all the people we could have helped on the way to their salvation if we had only used our gifts as God intended.

Then we have the gifts we can give to Jesus by giving something up. We can start with what we do in excess. Is it eating too much? Then we need to exercise some self-control. Is it too much to drink? Maybe we need to give it up. Is it the urge to gossip? Then it is time for us to find something else to discuss with our friends. None of us are without something that we need to sacrifice for our own salvation.

Today, this First Sunday in Advent begins our New Year. This season of Advent is the time to make and cement our resolutions, our gift to Jesus on his birthday, the one gift that will really make him happy. Our efforts to come closer to him with contrite and humble hearts.