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**27 Nov 2020**

Dear Parishioners of Our Lady's, St Anne's and St. Jerome's

### **'Stay awake'...**

In a few day's time, the latest national lockdown will end and we will enter, once again, the tiered system of restrictions. But our churches can reopen, so next weekend we can gather together again to celebrate Mass. We also learned that churches can open for Christmas. It will be different, but in the coming days our Pastoral Area will be looking at the best ways to make this happen.

This Sunday we begin the great and beautiful season of Advent. Twenty six days of the most beautiful Scripture readings and prayers. Days full of rich promise and consolation. This is our preparation for the worthy celebration of Christmas and for the moment when the Lord will come again and draw an end to human history.

I believe that in many ways, we have never been better prepared for Advent. Perhaps I should say that we have never needed Advent more. In these next twenty six days, we have an opportunity to gaze into the experiences of these past several months and perhaps see their place in the greater scheme of things, the bigger picture. To see things as God sees them and to be convinced that God uses all things for the good for those who love Him. For a short time, the readings, the prayers, the atmosphere carry us and enlighten us at the same time. Full of promise of a better future, God does not promise His people an immediate release from their sufferings, but an assurance that they are but a preparation to receive from His hand a future 'that no eye has seen, no ear has heard'.

God seems slow to fulfil His promises. We can hear the exasperation in the voice of Isaiah; 'Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down'. These are words we all understand; why can't God just be done with it all? All this suffering and mess, what's the point? How can a God of love permit all this? These are profoundly human questions. They require a divine answer!

The promises of God might be slow to reach fulfilment. Nature itself teaches us that growth takes time. Our times look for instant solutions and instant gain. But God is not slow to act. He is acting all the time, but out of sight, in the depths of many hearts. It is a very human reaction to want to put everything right, to restore order and balance, to right wrongs and solve problems. We see this most beautifully present in acts of love and service. But here, a dangerous temptation appears. The act of love, of care, of service can quickly put 'me' centre stage. It feels good! But it misses the point.

When we read the Gospels carefully, we notice that when Jesus worked a miracle for the good of others, he often disappeared quietly, went away, or often 'went alone into the hills to pray'. There is one line in the



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Gospels that describes Jesus perfectly; 'he went about doing good'. I love this line, because it is so simple, and sums up the whole Christian life. Here is the best part; we can all do it!

The pandemic has shaken the tree of the world violently. The leaves of people's health, work, livelihoods, relationships, economies and businesses have fallen to the ground. The tree is looking more bare, perhaps more simple. Here is our opportunity, and Advent is the perfect help; to simplify our faith life, our church life, our prayer life, our life of service. Perhaps a way of describing the life of our community of faith is 'they go about doing good'. But with this caveat; they were able to disappear quickly, as Jesus did. The glory, the credit is with God.

This is where God is acting. With every heart changed, opened, made more generous and loving, the fulfilment of God's promises move nearer. God truly wants to win us all, one heart at a time! That requires a lot of patience!

Yes, God has made a solemn promise. It is for all of us, not just the few. It is for each and every human being, 'and yet Lord, you are our Father'. To hear about a promise is one thing, to make it our own is another. What is the promise? That all will be well, that good will overcome, that the mess will be put right, that we can all be saved from the worst that threatens to overwhelm us. That in the end, we will all find our home together, with God.

This is why Jesus tells us to 'stay awake'. Why? Because the beauty of 'doing good', by drowning evil in a sea of goodness, will always be prone to the temptation of making it about 'us'. We need to 'stay awake' to be vigilant over ourselves. Perhaps we might say that when we plan a good and loving act, we also plan our exit strategy!

As we begin Advent, let us ask for illumination; the gentle light of God to show the way, the kind light of selfless and hidden acts of love, the light of promise that promises a better future for us all!

God bless you all.

**Father John**



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