Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 4pm/5pm Saturday; 7:15, 8:30& 11am Sunday – 900 words

The overarching theme of the liturgy for this First Sunday of Advent is that of readiness for the Lord’s coming. Indeed, we know that God’s people were not prepared for Christ’s first coming. If they had been, he would not have been born outside in the cold; rather, he would have received a royal welcome. But his first coming was missed by many. Thus we also read in the gospels how, at practically every key point in our Lord’s life, as he revealed more and more who he was and what his mission was to others, the people expressed surprise, saying things like: “Where did he get all this… Is this not the carpenter’s son?”;1 “What sort of man is this…?”2 They did not know or recognize him; they were unprepared.

This season affords us the opportunity each year, then, to offer some consolation to the Holy Family for what they suffered some 2,000 years ago. Jesus deserved better, and Mary and Joseph experienced offense and sadness over that. We have the benefit of hindsight, of having the fullness of the revelation that, then, was only gradually being revealed; but see how, even now, in spite of this knowledge, so few prepare the Lord’s way. This is our chance, then, and it is a chance that renews each year. Yet we know we are not only looking back, but also preparing for what lies ahead, when Christ will return in glory: we want to be ready for that also. How can we keep this season fruitfully, then?

The purple of this season reminds us that it is a time of penance; it may not be as structured as Lent, but penance is always how Catholics prepare for something great. We fast before we feast. In this regard, since the celebration of Christmas today is so full of materialism, a good penitential activity is precisely that of cleaning out the closets, of culling the toys and gadgets… of simplifying, in preparation not only for the new gifts that are coming, but also to benefit the poor and the needy, recognizing that Jesus came among us in their guise. Some families have their children give away one toy for each new one received, but given how well we live today, I’m not sure if an even exchange is really an honest reckoning. How can we make some sacrifices this year?

More than giving things away and simplifying, though, we should accumulate good works. Our first reading and collect for this Mass both expressed the wish that Christ might find us “with righteous deeds at his coming”. We can ask what we might do to benefit the poor and marginalized – again, recognizing that Jesus came in their guise. And this could even take the form of a spiritual adoption. Yes, aside from those volunteer activities that we might undertake to provide direct relief to those in need, there is a spiritual benefit we could give by dedicating ourselves to prayer and sacrifice for them. Maybe there’s a homeless person you always see, for whom you could offer a daily rosary. Maybe there’s that person at work who always seems to be haunted by a dark cloud, for whose benefit you could dedicate a weekly visit to the adoration chapel. And you can also leave it up to God, offering some daily prayer or sacrifice for the person who most needs it that day.

In the end, though, we must recognize that no amount of busy-ness and do-gooding will save us, if we are not right with God. “What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”, Jesus said in the gospel. Such vigilance is always possible, when we are otherwise so busy in our daily lives, if our souls are properly oriented to him by grace. A necessary part of our penitential preparation for Christmas – as we offer consolation to the Holy Family, looking back, and prepare for Christ’s return in glory, looking ahead – is that of making a good confession. You know that we

1 Mark 6:2-3
2 Matthew 8:27
offer the sacrament generously here, and as in previous years, I will advertise some additional times as Christmas nears. No, lack of time cannot be the excuse, for the priests here are available by appointment as well. We can decorate our homes so warmly to commemorate our Lord’s coming, thinking what a welcome we would have provided if we had been there 2,000 years ago. But when he comes in glory, how will he find our hearts? Will he again be out in the cold? Let us warm our hearts with his mercy, so richly available in the sacrament.

Isn’t that, after all, the entire reason he came? His sole purpose was to rescue us from sin by paying the price we could never pay. He became poor so that we might become rich. All the sadness and indignation Jesus, Mary, and Joseph experienced were ordered to our salvation. Every other sacrifice they made, culminating in Christ’s suffering and death on the cross, was for the sole purpose of saving us. How foolish we would be, not to take advantage of this gift. The greatest gift we can give our Lord this year and every year, as we wait for the time we will meet him face-to-face, is to seek out, receive, and also share his mercy generously, not letting a bit of it go to waste.