

## **Advent 1- B**

Mountain Institution, Agassiz

26 November 2011

Dear sisters, brothers and friends in Christ:

### ***Introduction***

Before beginning my homily I would like to express my gratitude to Kevin Sawyer, the volunteers of prison ministry, the administrators here, and all of you for inviting me to celebrate Mass with you this afternoon. It is a privilege for me to back here, and I would like to cite the words of St. Paul, which we heard in the Second Reading: “I give thanks to my God always for you, because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him” (I Cor 1:4-5). Think for a second: we should all be grateful, giving thanks to God: first of all, because he has given us our life – with all its trials and sorrows but also with its joys and triumphs – but most of all because, out of his goodness, he has given us the “grace” of Christ. The Father sent his only Son into the world to die and rise for us, so that we might be saved (cf. Jn 3:16). We have all of us – and each of us – been given this new birth, this new life, in Christ and as a friend of Christ. In a real sense we have been drawn into a circle of friendship where the Jesus is our Brother and Lord. This how we have been, as St. Paul says, “enriched” in him.

This is also why we are all people of equal dignity before God, each of us loved individually and personally. The Lord does not make exceptions to his love. When the Son of God left his heavenly throne to seek us out, his straying sheep, he did not leave anyone behind in the

wilderness. On the contrary, he has carried each of us on his shoulders to take us home. Listen again to how the First Reading ends, one taken from the Old Testament Prophet Isaiah: “We are the clay, and you are the potter; we are *all* the work of your hand” (Is 64:8). Indeed, his hands have moulded us and he does not forsake or abandon what he has made.

### ***New Roman Missal***

Today is an historic occasion in the life of the Church in Canada for we are using – and I am using here for the very first time – the new Roman Missal. The translation of the prayers of the Mass and some gestures have, after forty years, been changed. Some of them you will notice – such as striking your chest three times during the “I confess” at the beginning of Mass, and the response to the priest when he says “The Lord be with you,” and you will respond “and with your spirit.” Others you will notice less, because they are the prayers usually said by the priest.

Why are we changing? Well, first of all, we should recall that the Mass is *not* changing – only the English translation. Forty years ago, when the Church gave permission to celebrate the Mass in English, a translation was made quickly. It has served us well. Nonetheless, already twenty years ago, its inadequacies began to be apparent and translators went to work to improve what had been done. After huge amounts of input from bishops, experts, individuals and the Pope, we finally have the new translation which, from today onward, will be used

everywhere in Canada, and in the United States and other English-speaking countries as well. It is a grace for me to be able to use this for the first time with you here at Mountain.

Now I would like to offer a few reflections on the Word of God given to us this weekend.

### *Advent “Difficulties”*

Tomorrow the Church’s liturgical year begins once again, on the First Sunday of Advent. The Church offers us, yet again, a time of fresh beginnings, leading us to ponder once again what the Lord has done for us: to prepare for his Coming.

Unfortunately but almost inevitably, for all practical purposes the world puts aside the season of Advent aside, collapsing it into Christmas. It compromises, at least to a certain extent, the sense of anticipation that is at the heart of Advent for us. We are waiting – and we should not just endure waiting but reflect on what we are waiting for. Being incarcerated is its own Advent; it is a time of waiting for release, for a return to full freedom in public.

The Church’s season of Advent is a time of waiting; it recognizes that God has not finished with us. The entry of God into our lives is, for us, still unfinished. As long as we breathe, there is more of our lives to open, to unbar, to unlock so that we can be more fully his sons and his friends. In fact, there is no end to the ways that the Lord can penetrate

our lives. For St. Paul this friendship was so strong that he said, “it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (cf. Gal 2:20).

### ***Season of Hope***

Advent is a blessed time, an evocative religious season interwoven with hope and expectation: “every time the Christian community prepares to commemorate the Redeemer’s birth, it feels a quiver of joy which to a certain extent it communicates to the whole of society,”<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict has said. Advent also awakens a profound memory within us, one which all the world’s darkness cannot dim, namely, “the memory of the God who became a child. This is a healing memory; it brings hope.”<sup>2</sup> It is the beautiful task of Advent “to open doors to hope.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, *Angelus* (27 November 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Seek That Which Is Above*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Seek That Which Is Above*, 12.

During this season, the Church invites us to experience a dual impulse of the spirit. On the one hand, we raise our eyes towards the final destination of our pilgrimage through history: the return in glory of the Lord Jesus – that’s what the Gospel was getting at in its admonition that we stay awake for we do not know the hour when the Master will return for us (cf. Mk 13:45).

On the other hand, Advent also directs our hearts to remember with a child’s tenderness the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Where are we now? I’d say we are situated in the middle, between these events: looking backwards to Bethlehem, the beginning of our salvation in Christ, and straining forward to his final coming at the end of my life and of the history of the world. In a well known passage from his *Catechesis*, St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote:

In his first coming he was wrapped in swaddling clothes in the manger. In his second coming he is clothed with light as with a garment. In his first coming he bore the cross, despising its shame; he will come a second time in glory accompanied by the hosts of angels. It is not enough for us, then to be content with his first coming; we must wait in hope of his second coming.<sup>4</sup>

### ***With Joyful Hope***

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<sup>4</sup> Second Reading for Advent I in the Roman Breviary.

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we exclaim that “we await “the blessed hope and the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ.” Advent is the Church’s primordial season of hope.

It gives our hope for the future a firm foundation, supporting it by an event situated in history, which at the same time exceeds that history: the event of Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem of Judah.

Advent, therefore, is a favourable time for rediscovering a hope that is neither vague, like the wish of a child, but certain and reliable, because it is “anchored” in Christ, the Son of God who pitched his tent among us (cf. Jn 1:14). Our hope as Christians is turned to the future – something still awaits us – but remains firmly rooted in an event of the past which makes our hope reasonable and not “pie in the sky.”

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” (Is 64:1). The Prophet Isaiah’s great cry we heard in this afternoon’s First Reading well summarizes the longing for God present not only in the history of Israel but also in every human heart. And that cry was not uttered in vain. God crossed the threshold of his transcendence, his being distant in heaven: through his Son, Jesus Christ, he set out on the paths of man. He did not leave us wandering aimlessly in the desert of despair, nor did he let our hearts be hardened forever (cf. Is 63:17). In Christ, God draws near to us.<sup>5</sup> In the fullness of time, the Son of God was born of the Virgin

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. John Paul II, General Audience (26 July 2000), 1.

Mary: “Born of a woman, born under the law”, as the Apostle Paul writes (Gal 4:4).

### ***Keep Alert; Keep Awake***

While we wait with joyful hope for this glorious coming of the Son of Man, we also wait with a sense of urgency. Today’s Gospel invites us to stay on guard for his Coming. “Look around you!” Jesus says. “You do not know when the master of the house is coming” (Mk 13:35). The short parable of the master who went on a journey, leaving his servants responsible for acting in his place, highlights how important it is to be ready to welcome the Lord whenever he appears. Watching in hope is the proper way to act in the face of the coming kingdom. Jesus suggests that we share the attitude shown by servants in a household as they await their master’s uncertain return. Since they do not know the precise time of his arrival, they should be expecting him always and be careful to be found doing their duty.

Jesus tells us to “beware” and “keep alert.” Such an attitude or disposition of soul is the opposite of distraction, which, unfortunately, is frequently our state, especially in our frenetic, superficial society. We find it difficult to focus on a goal and to pursue it with fidelity and consistency. We risk doing so even with God.

To counteract this spiritual drowsiness, the Lord exhorts us to “keep awake” or to “watch.” These verbs call to mind a sentinel guarding the

walls, while he waits patiently for night-time to pass in order to see the light of dawn breaking on the horizon. Despite the seeming delay, Christians are ever watchful for the coming of the Lord. Our life as believers is a continuous and vigilant waiting for his arrival, ever conscious of the Lord's word: "for you do not know when the time will come" (Mk 13:33).

These words of Jesus in Mark's Gospel may be read not only as a warning about the end times, but as a challenge for us to live in the present, to engage life now, to be attentive to the moment at hand. It is the call of Advent itself. Keep awake. Do not put off the opening of your life to God.

This is the meaning of a new liturgical year which is beginning: it is a gift of God, who once again wishes to make us his friends in Christ. God is offering to his people, which, even if we no longer seem to have time for him, further time. He offers us this Advent of 2011, to set out anew on a journey to rediscover the meaning of hope.

Here, then, is a surprising and consoling fact. God loves us and for this very reason wants us to return to him. He wants us to open our hearts to his love, to place our hands in his and remember that we are his children. This generous and merciful attitude of God always precedes our asking, just as his love always reaches us first (cf. I Jn 4:10).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily at First Vespers of Advent I (1 December 2007).



## ***Conclusion***

As we continue of celebration of this Holy Eucharist, let us ask that the good Lord, the Potter, to take the clay of our lives and refashion it so that we may be pleasing to him and fulfilled in ourselves. At this Table he comes to be with us, as he does in every situation of our lives.

Because he loves us, he comes to dwell among us, to live with us and within us; he comes to fill the gaps that divide and separate us; he comes to reconcile us with him and with one another.

He comes into human history to knock at the door of every man and every woman of good will, to bring to individuals, families and peoples the gifts of brotherhood, harmony and peace. This is why Advent is par excellence the season of hope in which believers in Christ are invited to remain in watchful and active waiting, nourished by prayer and by an effective commitment to love.

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB

Archbishop of Vancouver