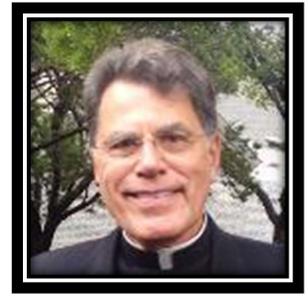


Fr. Samuel's Homily

First Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2017



I have a confession to make. Recently, in looking at the weeks of Advent ahead and the beginning of the Christmas season on December 25, I found myself looking forward to January. That is so because my calendar in December is full. There is so much to do, so much to prepare and so many obligatory activities. I even found myself thinking at one point, “This is the 26th year that I am going through the Advent and Christmas seasons as a priest and every year it just seems to get busier and busier.” There is just so much stuff to do. As I considered that, I had to pause to wonder how it is that a time of the year that had been, at one time, magical to me, has devolved into something of a prolonged chore.

Then, as often happens when I find myself in similar states of mind, I happened across something while reading. God works with me in that way. He knows how much I read. So he seems to sneak things in on me, in my literary meanderings, in order to get my attention. And sometimes that has the effect of helping me to see and understand something that I need to see and understand in a better way. What I came across was a little story entitled:

What Is the World Like?

God and a man were walking down a road. The man asked God, “What is the world like?”

God replies, “I cannot talk when I am thirsty. If you can get me a drink of cool water we can then discuss what the world is like. There is a village nearby. Go there and get me a drink.”

The man goes into the village and knocks at the door of the first house. A beautiful young woman opens the door. His jaw drops but he manages to ask for a cup of water. “Of course,” she says smiling, “but it is midday. Would you care to stay for some food?” “I am hungry,” he replies, looking over his shoulder, “And your offer of food is a great kindness.” He goes in and the door closes behind him.

Thirty years pass by. The man and the woman have married and raised five children. He is a respected merchant and an honored member of the community. Then, one day a terrible storm comes off the ocean and threatens their lives. The merchant cries out, “Help me, God!” A voice comes from the midst of the storm, “Where is my cup of water?”

Our spiritual traditions warn us about becoming lost in the world. We do tend to get lost in the everyday demands of our lives. That can cause us to fail to be attentive to the spiritual sides of our lives. There are so many things, most of the time, in themselves, good things that distract us. Eating, drinking, marrying, raising families, building careers and so on keep us preoccupied during most of the days of our lives. In this season of the year, everyday activities seem to increase in intensity. We plan for gatherings of families and friends. We cook and bake. We shop both for

what we want to give and for what we have to give. We attend celebrations that we want to attend and obligatory ones as well. We visit locally and travel distantly. We decorate and on and on. And one result of all of this frenzied activity is that it tends to put us to sleep spiritually. It can lead us to long not for the celebration of the birth of Christ on Christmas day but for the relief of the days of January when all of it is over. The rush of the season works against the meaning of the season. We become so preoccupied by that rush that we forget that God is waiting for us to be attentive to him. He is waiting for us to notice to his immense love for us and his generosity to us in his coming to us in the form of a little child. God waits hoping that we might remember.

It is curious that we put up with it. I suspect that a number of you are sitting here today agreeing with what I am saying. However, I suspect that once Mass is done and we walk out of here into the cacophony of demands, both commercial and personal, many of us will fall right back into it. That is because, so often we tend to spend our days in what the poet T.S. Eliot called, "living and partly living." That is to say that we tend to treat spirituality as a luxury. We have time to take care of our physical needs, work, take care of our families, run all the errands we need to run and many other good things. But as for things of the Spirit, very often, those get short notice if any at all. For some of us it is an obligation to be gotten through in an hour or even less if possible. That leaves our spirits, which are the very core of our being, in a state in which they can only languish and even atrophy. In such a state all of this then becomes meaningless activity leading to nothing of lasting value. That, I believe, is what Jesus was talking about in today's gospel. He is telling us that God is present, not just at some future second coming but now as well in the contexts of our lives as we live them. However, if we do not tend to our spiritual needs, if we allow ourselves to be distracted by worldly concerns it is as if we are asleep to the presence of God.

How can we keep spiritually aware in the midst of all of the things of this season? Well, the Church has given us the means if we are willing to embrace them. First of all remember this: We are not yet in the Christmas season. That begins on December 25. Today marks the beginning of the Advent season, a season of preparation for the Christmas season. The rest of the world may have been trying to make it the Christmas season since Halloween but we Catholics are not there yet. We are in Advent. One of the things that we can do as individuals and families is to turn our attention, at least, for a few minutes each day to the central symbol of this season. That is the Advent wreath. I encourage you to keep one in your homes and use it each day for a time of ritual prayer. The lighting of the candles over the next four weeks symbolizes the growing light of Christ. The evergreens symbolize the promise of eternal life as does the circular shape. You might do this as a family or even an individual activity at dinner time as part of your blessing of your meal. Or you might do it at the beginning of the day to help you to remember throughout the day what this season means. A little time of focusing can go a long way in giving our spirits what they need in order to truly appreciate this beautiful season of preparation for Christmas.

Other things that you might consider include, coming to a daily mass or two each week, spending some time each week in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, praying the rosary each day or just spending a bit of time in quiet prayer or reflection. You might, as well, attend some of the special celebrations and liturgies that we are offering here in the next four weeks. Obviously I am emphasizing here various forms of prayer. It is through prayer that we grow in attentiveness. It is through prayer that we are able both to live, not partially but more fully in both the secular and spiritual aspects of our lives. It is through prayer that we can draw the secular and the spiritual into unity with each other.

We will all face challenges in upcoming weeks. I have a full schedule and so too, I suspect, do most of you. However, I might add this as well. I think that another way of becoming more spiritually engaged with this season is by remembering that no matter how busy we are there are those who do not share in that. There are those who are not so busy because they are alone, they are poor or for other reasons that shut them out of the “joy” of the season. Thus, while making sure that we spend time taking care of our own souls in this season we need to remember that all prayer must lead us both to gratitude and to generosity. We become grateful for what God has done for us in Christ and we come to know that we have to share his blessing with others. That is, as well, a fundamental meaning of this season.

In closing I come back to the word of the poet Eliot. We can choose to “live” this season or to only “partly live” it. The demands and the temptations out there tend toward the latter. The invitation here is to the former. But it is up to each of us to make our choice between the demands and the temptations of commercialization and secularization or the invitation of the sacred. We can become even more lost in the things of the world or we can choose to allow Christ to find us ready and waiting for him.