

Reflection - First Sunday of Advent 2021 by Fr James Mulligan

For nearly 25 years, my father was a ground crew serviceman for Air New Zealand. He was a "tuggy" driver transferring baggage to and from planes departing and arriving at Auckland International Airport. Working 12 hour shifts four days on four days off, especially night shifts, certainly was not easy! For our family, this involved making certain sacrifices. Many times, the old man had to work weekends and even the occasional Christmas. But all his life, he has seldom missed Sunday Mass. He is still fond of talking about his work mates' amazement at his refusal to do extra hours for extra pay on Sundays. They soon learned the reason why! He always knew where and when he could attend "his" Mass. I notice that many recently arrived immigrant Catholics are very much the same. Society still depends so much on those who work very unsociable hours while the rest of us are fast asleep. Who keep essential services going day and night, even during lockdown. But that's wakefulness for you. Spiritual wakefulness entails more than just going without sleep. Foolishness sleeps soundly while wisdom tosses and turns with each thinking hour, longing for the dawn of answers. Some people dream of success and others stay awake to achieve it. To be awake is to be alive (Henry David Thoreau).

On this first Sunday of Advent, Jesus' appeal to his disciples to stay alert while they await his return conveys a similar message. As we can see from his dramatic imagery of disturbances in outer space, of nations in dismay, of confusion in the face of extreme weather events and of the heavens being shaken, there was no room for complacency. Because the disciples believed that Jesus would return in their own lifetimes, they imagined that the consequences of being unprepared were too awful to contemplate. Considering all that menaced their world, they would have been somewhat fearful for the future. But Jesus was not into fear. Rather, he wanted to transform fear into hope. Fulfilling Jeremiah's promise to Israel of freedom from exile in our first reading, Jesus was the virtuous branch who grew from David's line who would restore God's people, as the lord-our-integrity. Lest the day of his return be sprung on them suddenly like a trap, the disciples simply had to stay awake. As they prayed for the strength to survive all that was going to happen, our friends would echo the Psalmist's pleas for divine assistance, pleas made in the confidence that God's faithfulness would be made evident through Jesus. The disciples' wakefulness would spell the difference between life and death. Not only did they dream of success, but they were also prepared to stay awake to see it realised. To be awake is to be alive...

As we learn to live and worship in a Covid world, Jesus' call to vigilance is no less vital for us now. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul reinforces this by urging us to make and more progress in the kind of life that we are meant to live. The past three months have been an ideal pathway to Advent. We have had to live more reflectively. We have had to keep our own heads high, even as our own worlds have been plunged into chaos. So how awake are we really? Have we used this time of waiting productively to discern the coming of Jesus (who, in a way, has come to us already in our bubbles), or have we let our hearts become insensitive to his coming through present cares and anxieties? As we rebuild our community, the Advent Jesus wishes to rouse us from the sleep of indifference, that we may become active and conscious participants in our salvation and not just go through the motions as passive, guilty bystanders. May we be found blameless to stand with confidence before him when he comes. Our liberation is nearer than we realise. To be awake is to be alive.

*We wait – all day long,
for planes and buses,
for dates and appointments,
for five o'clock and Friday.*

*Some of us wait for a Second Coming.
For God in a whirlwind.
Paratrooper Christ.*

*All around us people are waiting:
a child for attention;
a spouse for conversation;
a parent, for a letter or call.*

*The prisoner waits for freedom;
and the exile, to come home.
The hungry, for food;
and the lonely, for a friend.*

*The whole earth's a waiting room!
"The Savior will see you now"
is what we expect to hear at the end.*

*Maybe we should raise our expectations.
The savior might see us now
if we know how to find him.*

*Could it be that Jesus, too, is waiting
for us to know he is around?
(Joseph T Nolan, *The Whole Earth's A
Waiting Room*, 2000)*

