

1st Sunday of Advent 2011
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My homily for the first Sunday of Advent has a certain “shape” to it. It is in two parts and its inspiration comes from the words of the prophet Isaiah: “you are the potter, we are the clay.” In the midst of the prophet’s almost desperate cry that God rend the heavens and come and put our world in order, there is the beautiful image of the potter and the clay, God’s giving us “shape”, molding us and forming us.

The first shape has lot of curves. It’s a twisting, turning shape.

Knock, Knock? Who’s there? Happy! Happy Who? Happy New Year!

I’ve been using the form of “knock, knock” jokes to teach our families and children some of the new Mass responses. I use the dialogue “knock knock, who’s there” to illustrate how sometimes we don’t have to think to respond. Since we have said, “The lord be with you and also with you” for so many years, it’s an automatic response. That’s why the changes are challenging. You have to be awake, alert and really attentive.

So Happy New Year! And this is a ‘New Year.’ This first Sunday of Advent 2011 is really a New Year for English speaking Catholics. Some would say it’s really an Old year since the new translations have an “old” feel to them, a throw back to a Mass from another era.

So just as we need to stay awake and alert so not to fall into “automatic responses,” maybe we need to examine our “automatic responses” to another advent season. The automatic response that comes to mind each advent is a “resolve” to really stay focused on what Advent is about: getting oneself in shape for the coming of the Lord (and that doesn’t mean just the celebration of Christmas.) Advent is about the coming of the Lord into our lives each day as well as at the end of time.

Do any of these “resolves” (new year’s resolutions) sound like your automatic responses? (They certainly are mine.)

1. I will try to slow down and dedicate more time for prayer and reflection in this season that invites me to “prepare” for the Lord’s coming.

2. I will not get caught up in the frenzy of Christmas preparations but rather stay calm and centered.
3. I will try not to be seduced by the emphasis on the material and concentrate on the true meaning of Advent as a time of waiting patiently.

These are our automatic responses but the reality is that we easily get swept up in the Christmas rush and just can't slow down. So how do we get in shape and stay in shape for Advent?

Let's begin with the question, what shape are you in at the beginning of this new liturgical year? What form, shape, is the mold that you are in right now? Round, after Thanksgiving festivities? Contorted, like many of us who are twisting and turning to make the best of the "new" translations even though it may take a contortionist to pray them with any grace? Flat, without much energy, air, spirit? Or "in good shape"? Ready to take on whatever challenges come your way? Malleable, flexible? Rigid, inflexible? What shape are you in as you begin this New Year? How will God mold and shape you during this Advents season? Are you willing to be "shaped"?

The shape of this second part is "cruci-form":

Knock, Knock, who's there? Jesus! Jesus who? Jesus who? So long I have been with you and still you do not know me?

This new year, Advent 2011, begins the B cycle of readings where we encounter Jesus through the Marcan lens. The majority of gospel reading we will hear from now until the feast of Christ the King 2012 will come from Mark's gospel. The Jesus we encounter in Mark's gospel is in a way the most human portrait of Jesus, perhaps the easiest to identify with. The Marcan Jesus questions, gets depressed, struggles to understand his identity and to accept the suffering that is the crux of his mission. Yes, Mark's Jesus calms the storm, heals and casts out demons, but he is also very human. Jesus who calms the fears of his disciples and those who come to him in need is not afraid to embrace and accept the human condition, even death on a cross.

That is what we hear in today's Gospel. Hidden in the warning to stay awake and watch is a prediction of the passion of Christ. Each of the times mentioned: at evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, or at dawn, is significant in

the passion of Jesus. Each time signifies something cataclysmic that would happen to him. Betrayal in the evening, arrest at midnight, denial at cockcrow, trial and judgment in the morning. At the beginning of Advent we are already plunged into the passion, the suffering of the one who has come to be incarnate, to be human with us. Jesus is the one we are waiting for but he is the one who is already with us in his passionate love for us on the cross. As Christians we believe that God has answered Isaiah's call to "rend the heavens and come down." We believe that in Jesus God has heard our cries for God to "put our world in order." And we ask that God mold us and shape us in the image of Jesus.