

Generally we do a very fine job of preparing for what we know, events that we expect at some future date that can be precisely determined. We make our plans and prepare for family events such as birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, and the like. We are also quite adept, despite the hectic pace, at preparing for major holidays such as Easter and Christmas. We make extensive plans for our next holiday or long weekend.

Imagine watching, hearing or reading, **Jesus Christ Will Return on December 25!** What would we do? How would we react to this astonishing information? I think there would be two basic reactions. Some of us, out of fear, would change our lives immediately. The Lord is coming and we are not ready. We might start going to Church more often, probably every day. Prayer would become a much higher priority in life. We would pray not only in the morning and evening, but many times each day. We would seek reconciliation, with a member of our family, neighbour, colleague, and certainly with God.

Others might have a very different response. Some of us might do nothing differently. Some in a defeatist attitude might say, "There is nothing I can do at this late hour. God has already decided my fate. I might as well continue what I have been doing all along." There are still others who might not change a thing they are doing, but not in a defeatist mode. Some of us hopefully would say, "Isn't this the event for which the world has been waiting? Isn't this the reason that I was born?" Possession of such an attitude would allow us to continue doing what we have always been doing, confident that our preparations have been sound.

While one must be vigilant and properly prepared, there should be nothing to fear. God is the judge, but as Christians, living in the light and hope of Christ's message of reconciliation, peace, and love, we can be confident that the Lord stands ready to welcome us. The question we must ask is: Have we faithfully led the life the Lord has given us? We must evaluate our lives, take the oftentimes perilous inward journey of self-discovery, and ask the hard questions.

I remember the popular 1974 song by Harry Chapin, "Cat's In The Cradle." Which topped the charts here and in the US. In the lyrics, each time a man's son asks, "When're you coming home, Dad?" the response received is, "I don't know, but we'll get together then." As this story repeats the boy gains his father's attitude until in the end when the father asks his adult son, "When're you coming home, son?" the answer received is, "I don't know. But we'll get together then." The father's procrastination leads to the loss of his son. A famous and anonymous poem describes the challenge we face:

*He was going to be, all that he wanted to - **Tomorrow.***

*None would be kinder or braver than he - **Tomorrow.***

*A friend who was troubled and weary, he knew, who'd be glad of a lift, and who needed it too, on him he would call and see what he could do - **Tomorrow.***

*Each morning he stacked up the letters he'd write - **Tomorrow.***

*And the thought of the friends he would fill with delight - **Tomorrow.***

*But hadn't one minute to stop on his way, "More time I will give to others," he'd say - **Tomorrow.***

*The greatest of disciples this man would have been — **Tomorrow.***

*The world would have hailed him if he had seen - **Tomorrow.***

*But, in fact, he passed on, and he faded from view, And all that he left here when living was through,
Was a mountain of things he intended to do — **Tomorrow!***

We must not wait until something happens, such as a bout with ill health, an accident, or economic misfortune, to "make right" our relationship with God. We need to get going *now*! Jesus' warning in the gospel to be aware of the signs of the times challenges us to open our eyes and ears to our contemporary world. We would be blind to not realise that secularisation dominates our society; we cannot avoid this reality. We should reap the benefits of our first-world Australian society, but living in the world does not mean we must be of the world. We must be the sign of the times of which Jesus speaks. One of the more prominent signs of today's world preaches an anti-Christian message. We, the contemporary disciples of Jesus, must be, therefore, a sign of a different Christ-centred message. We must be a sign for the vigilance that is needed and the preparedness we must undertake.

These must be the signs we give to the world, not the fear that paralyses and leads to inaction. We need not carry a sign that warns, "The End Is Near." We can do much more and be more positive through the example we set. A popular Christian hymn from the 1970's reflecting a view of Christians from the 2nd Century provides the goal, "They'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love."

Advent begins with our need to patiently and without fear or consternation wait for the coming of the Lord at the end of time. At this time of year the busy lives we lead only become more filled with things to do, people to see, and activities that fill our diaries. We become "stressed out" and worried about many things. Our busyness often keeps us from concentrating on things that are much more fundamental in our lives, most especially our relationship with God. We fear waiting for we do not like the unknown. However, today's scripture readings tell us that we need to develop the ability to wait patiently for God, always remembering how patient God is with us.

Death, our ultimate meeting with God, is a fearful event for most because we have no control and are baffled by what will happen. Yet, if we have done what God asks of us, if we have made a good effort to fulfil our vocations to holiness and service, then there is nothing to fear. As our Advent journey begins, therefore, let us find the time to wait with joy and wonder. Let us take the time to wait for God, who created us, has loved us, and stands ready to greet us with his words of encouragement, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34b).

Fr Robert Newton