

“Take heed and watch, for you do not know when the time will come.”

Story of the Advent Police at GTS teaches us that even a good intention can have a negative effect.

Likewise, when I was in high school in Indiana I lived in a parish whose Rector had very strong ideas about the Advent Season--ideas that in one sense were hard to disagree with but in another sense had a rather negative effect whenever he announced them. Annually, he mounted the pulpit on the first Sunday of Advent and preached against the early Christmas shopping and the commercialism that it represented. He denounced the playing of Christmas music in supermarkets prior to December 25. He reminded the parish that trees and the church itself were not to be decorated until Christmas eve! Even Christmas cards were to be sent only in the twelve days after Christmas, and they should be “returned to sender” if received before. For that priest and that parish Advent was rather dark and gloomy, even depressing, even though the parishioners by their priest’s efforts were well aware in that season of their own sins and of the serious side of human life.

It is hard for us to deny the good intention of such a forthrightly negative approach to Advent in the preparation for Christmas, hard to reject the good, if playful intention of the Advent Police, but I wonder if it is not possible to take a more positive approach in preparation for our Lord’s Nativity. After all, in Advent we are called to prepare for something stupendous, something that changed the face of human history. We are called to anticipate, once more in God’s time, the birth of a little baby who is also our Savior and a mighty Judge whom we accept as the standard for our lives. We are called to anticipation of the joy, hope, and love which are embodied in that child. Can we not construct a more positive approach towards something which is, after all, the center point of Christian history?

For a start, I want to suggest that one paradigm for the kind of positive preparation and anticipation that we should have for this season is in fact already modelled for us at the human level in the experiences of expectant parents, in the experiences of pregnant mothers-to-be and their husbands. Their anticipation and expectation is not without elements of anxiety and fear. Their situations are not without a sense of responsibility for what is to come and a sense of some grief for what must be left behind. The birth of a baby, a very special baby, should appropriately engender excitement and delight, but there is also the added dimension of getting ready for that child. Is there room in our hearts and in our homes?

Let us think of every Christian as an expectant parent in the season of Advent, and let us ask some questions for ourselves in that light. What must I do to be ready for the joy of the birth of Jesus on Christmas morning? Have I loved God faithfully and fervently in the days that are now past? Do I love my neighbor as myself? Do my words and deeds reflect that love? Do I take care of myself? Does my lifestyle reflect that care? What about diet and exercise? What about stress and relaxation? What about smoke and drink? What of doctor’s visits and medications? What of the state of my emotions and of my soul? What of my prayer life, especially of the things I know I ought to have done but have not done? Can I approach that baby in the manger on Christmas eve or morning, with a clear conscience that I am ready to receive him, in body, mind, and spirit? Ready for him to be Lord in my life? In a sense Advent becomes for all of us a period of pre-natal examination and care. We too must become Advent police – of ourselves.

Let us think of ourselves, therefore, as expectant parents, and let us think of Advent positively as a time of preparation, even of self-examination and reflection in which, along with whatever else we do to get ready for the holidays, we also get ourselves ready to share in the love of the Christ Child more fully. After all, it is in the love of one another and for one another that we most fully experience and express the love of that little child. As is well said, “In the end the love you take is equal to the love you make.” The giving of gifts, for example, is one way of sharing our love, and yet there is so much within ourselves, so much about ourselves, so much about the way we live our lives and structure our society, that too often gets in the way of our expressing and experiencing that love. So Advent is a good time to examine our lives and our lifestyles, our schedules and priorities, our relationships and our homes, in a prayerful and serious fashion in the hope that

we may shed some of our accumulated barriers to that love. In a good sense, then, we must become our own Advent Police! As the Scripture says, “Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow or in the morning, lest the master come suddenly and find you sleeping.”

Let us also pause as we, like expectant parents, develop a positive approach to this season, and to the future that is yet to come. Sad it is that too often, in some places, people dread the coming of Christmas, and a negative Advent season only reinforces that dread. Psychological professionals and pastors alike report that often the Christmas holidays are a time of widespread depression among people of virtually every age, class, and background. Suicide rates are said to peak between Christmas and Epiphany. Our loss of loved ones becomes most painful in Advent as Christmas approaches. It would seem that holidays, especially the Christmas holidays, have the effect of highlighting and focusing our disappointments, our losses, our hurts, our loneliness. We tend to remember the sad Christmases past rather than to imagine new and more pleasant ones that may lie in God’s future for us. And above all, we lose sight of Heaven in which we have placed our hope. For too many of us, a highly commercialized and unduly romanticized Christmas has come to be a time of great expectations but profound disappointments. We long for happiness, but often find emptiness. We discover that family ties do get broken, that cherished friendships wane, that loved ones move away and distances become too great for holiday reunions. Sometimes we journey back to places once special to us, only to discover that the magic is no longer there, even that the people we knew are no longer there. Sometimes we journey back to places once special only to discover that the persons we have become are no longer welcome there. Career disappointments, employment uncertainties, academic difficulties, medical problems, financial worries, household stress, troubled relationships: All are difficult at the best of times, but they hold a particular potential for making the holidays a little harder and more dreadful.

So Advent I suggest, in the face of such realities, needs to become more of a time when we, like expectant parents, watch and prepare ourselves in a healthy and helpful and positive way for the total reality of Christmas and all the complexities and possibilities that it holds. Life is too short not to take advantage of these times when with joy we can truly celebrate – when with positive delight we can share. If we would keep the season of Advent as a time of serious preparation, not starting Christmas too early but also taking a positive rather than a negative attitude toward Advent itself, then let us use this time, like expectant parents, to re-examine our Christian commitment in the totality of our lives. Now is the time to ask ourselves: Do I take my faith, do I take the Gospel, do I take Jesus Christ, do I take Christian values, out from the Church with me? Into my home? Into the office? Into the voting booth? Into my fun? Into my relationships and family life? Into my dealings with friends, neighbors, enemies, and strangers? OR, is Christianity something with which I simply play on Sundays and only when it is convenient? These are difficult questions and I suspect that few if any of us can truly answer that our faith in Jesus Christ and his Gospel is at the very center of our lives every hour of every day. Yet this is what Jesus actually calls us to do – what the prophets and John the Baptist call us to do in this holy season of Advent. To put God and the Gospel before all else at the center of our lives. We need to become our own police. “Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house will come.”

So let us this Advent, like expectant parents, ask ourselves what we can do to prepare to share the joy and love which is the birthright of every Christian at Christmas. Let us, in a positive sense, be our own Advent Police. What does stewardship of our times, talent, and treasure mean for us this Christmas? Who stands in need of our love? Who would rejoice to hear from us? Who will be alone that we might take into our families or our homes? Whom can we visit? With whom can we share? Can we too assist in giving birth to the Christ Child? Will we live only for ourselves, or for the sake of the One who is able to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, whose child begs to be born anew this year in our hearts and lives? Watch, therefore! Watch!

J Robert Wright
St John’s of Lattingtown, Advent Sunday, 28 November 2010.

