

An Advent Greeting

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

I write these words as a liturgical year draws to a close and a new one opens. I have been at the Generalate since the last week of October and am beginning to find my way but with my learner plates still in evidence. The memory of the MGM is fading into the past though the effects of it are increasingly with me. My experience of the election and of the MGM was an experience of *koinonia*/communion and of encouragement in our Cistercian monastic life and in answering the call of God.

The MGM also impressed me by the diversity that exists in the Order within the real communion that is there. It is this diversity that strikes me now as I set down to write these lines. How can I say something that speaks to situations that are so diverse – communities that have a long tradition, others that are new; communities with many elderly members and others bustling with younger ones; communities that are poor economically and others that are secure; diversity in terms of culture, climate, nationality, people – nuns and monks coming to the end of their lives and others with it all before them? And yet we are all making the one journey, with the Gospel as our guide, hastening to our heavenly homeland.

A major point of contact for all of us is the Liturgy and the unfolding of the mystery of Christ that we share in, whatever our personal or community circumstances. In this season we are presented with the mystery of the end of our existence and the goal and purpose of our lives. We hear about the end of all things and are invited to look at the great expectation that is ours in the final coming of Christ at the end of time. My few thoughts on this mystery come from chapters 24 and 25 of the Gospel of Matthew which has been our guide this past liturgical year. These two chapters form the fifth and final of the five great discourses of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. You will recall that chapters 24 and 25 speak about the destruction of Jerusalem, the trials and tribulations of this time and the coming of Christ at the end of time. There are warnings and parables illustrating how the Christian is to view this reality and live in the meantime.

The point of departure for Jesus' teaching is the question of the disciples: "Tell us, when will this be and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" (Mt. 24:3). These questions are questions that are asked in every age and ones most people would like to have answered. They give voice to the very human desire to know what is going to happen, as well as to the Christian expectation of the coming of Christ. They express the concern that all of us have about what the future hold for us. Where is my life going and when and how will the promises of Jesus be realised?

The great truth at the heart of these two chapters is that Jesus will come at the end of time (Mt. 24: 31) to gather the elect into his kingdom and that his judgment will bring about the justice that is the blessed life of the Kingdom of God (Mt. 25: 31-46) described in the account of the final judgment with the image of separation of sheep and goats. This is the end to which life in this world is directed. The imagery, the apocalyptic obscurity and exegetical issues should not blur or distract from this truth which is the heart of Christian hope. This liturgical time then reminds us of where we are going and of where our sights need to be set. We need to note too that our end is not just a new cosmic reality (new heaven and new earth) but a personal one – a meeting with the One who has called us to follow him and for whom we have given our lives. Jesus tells us the truth about himself and his place in the mystery of the coming of God's Kingdom but he also states quite clearly that only the Father knows when this will take place, when the end will come. There is no way of predicting it and no one has privileged access to this knowledge. We know our end in life but we don't know when the end will come.

And so Jesus points out hazards along the way for his followers and tells us how to live in this time between his first and second coming. One of the hazards or temptations to which we are subject is the claims of people who say they know when and where the end will be. No matter what credentials they may display (in terms of "signs and wonders") Jesus is insistent – we must not believe them. We need to learn to live with our unknowing, for we walk by faith and trust in him and in his word.

Our time in this world will involve suffering, he assures us, but that suffering if lived in faith by the Christian will "shorten the time of suffering" and hasten the coming of the Kingdom. Jesus speaks here of birth

pangs which reminds us of how Paul describes the coming about of the new creation. The danger here is to lose hope because of one's suffering.

Another hazard along the way is to get tired of the ordinariness of life. We still have to work in the field and grind at the mill. The danger here is apathy and indifference and even sinful behaviour. Waiting becomes a burden that dulls us to the wonder of life and the hope that is ours.

After these warnings Jesus tells us more positively how we need to live in this time: we need to live with vigilance, responsibly and lovingly. This vigilance is really living in a state of preparedness so that we are ready for Jesus when he comes (parable of wise and foolish virgins). We are called to live responsibly and to use the abilities given us and to be faithful and persevering in our service (the parables of the faithful servant and of the talents). And finally we are called to do all this in love – we prepare for the coming of Christ by living the command to love our neighbour (what you did to the least of these you did to me). Charity is the true test of faith. In each of these attitudes we can note that the attention is outside ourselves, attentiveness to the other. We look to Jesus' coming; we do what he asks of us; we use the gifts he has given us; we love our neighbour and in doing so love Jesus.

These are the main points of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24 and 25. For the monk (as for the Christian) it calls us in this Advent time to sharpen our focus and to check the direction of our lives, to keep the end in view. Or better to keep the "love of our lives" burning. Advent is a season of joyful expectation and not one of penitence but there is an aspect of austerity about it that is due to that sense of expectation and preparedness. Other things are cut out to focus on the goal (Christ who is coming but who is also present in my neighbour) because, as the poet said, "through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder."

Whether we are at dawn of our monastic lives, full of energy and occupied with new things and plans for the future, or whether we are bearing the heat of the midday sun and the burdens and satisfactions of responsibility or whether we are at the sunset of our days, when to walk uphill is an ordeal, we are all still called to look to the one who comes with confidence in his word and to live attentively, responsively and lovingly. To do this is to fulfil the command of Jesus and to find life in him.

The spirit of what I would call this attentive and discerning love I found wonderfully expressed in this story from the Desert Fathers:

A priest of Scete had the gift of discernment of spirits. One day when going to celebrate the Sunday Liturgy he saw hordes of demons outside the cell of one of the brothers. They took the form of women, dancing in a very enticing way. The old man groaned and said: this brother is living a negligent life and so he is in trouble with a lot of temptation. After the Liturgy he went to the cell of the brother and said to him: Brother, I am very troubled at the moment. Please pray for me that I may be delivered from my temptations. The brother was quite taken aback and went down on his knees and said he was not worthy to pray for the elder. But the elder insisted and said he would not leave the cell until the young monk promised him that he would get up at night and say a prayer for the elder. Finally, the brother agreed and said he would pray as he had been asked. And so that night the brother got up and prayed for the elder. Then when he had finished his prayer he said to himself: "You are a right wretch. Here you are praying for this elder and you won't pray for yourself!" He was struck with compunction and so prayed for himself. And he continued this practice of praying each night for the elder and for himself.

The following Sunday the elder came to celebrate the Liturgy and again he saw the devils dressed as women but they were more subdued now and he was very happy about this. After the Liturgy he went along to the brother and asked him to do him a favour and add another prayer for him to the one he was already saying because he was still troubled. The brother agreed and that night said a second prayer for the elder. Then he was moved to compunction once again and said he might as well say one for himself. And he did this for another week. The third Sunday the elder came again and saw that the activity of the demons was fading out and he rejoiced and went along again and begged for another prayer to be added. The brother agreed and each night that week said three prayers for the elder and three for himself. When the elder visited the next Sunday the demons came and reviled him because they realised that the brother had been saved from them and then they disappeared. The elder went in to the brother rejoicing and told him that all was well and commanded him to pray and keep watch and to do so continually.

May you have a blessed Advent, joyful Christmas and hope-filled New Year.
Fraternally in Christ,



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