1st Sunday of Advent, Year B

Br. Samuel Springuel

29 November, 2020

1st Reading  Isaiah 63:16B–17,19B; 64:2–7

Responsorial Psalm  Psalm 80:2–3,15–16,18–19

2nd Reading  1 Corinthians 1:3–9

Gospel  Mark 13:33–37

In our hyperconnected society, Jesus’s analogy about the traveller falls a little flat. When was the last time you went on a trip and didn’t know exactly when you were coming home? Whether booking a round-trip ticket or taking time off from work, travel today tends to be scheduled almost to the minute. And if something causes that scheduling to go awry, there are flight trackers, GPS’s with real-time traffic updates, and all sorts of other tools designed to let us, and those we care about, know exactly how much extra time our travel is going to take. And even when all of that fails, we’re all carrying around phones in our pockets, allowing us to text or call people to provide updates from the road. We have tamed the travel experience as much as possible. Not knowing when a traveller is going to arrive, not knowing when we are going to arrive, is intolerable, unpredictable, wild. In our desire to control our lives, to order things according to our own liking and convenience, we have created all these structures to give us power over what was previously ungovernable.

The season of Advent is, in a sense, another such attempt at control. The word “Advent” comes from two Latin words: the preposition “ad,” meaning “to” or “towards,” and “ventus,” the past participle of the verb “venio,” meaning “has come.” Thus “Advent” is the season which moves us (or in which we are moving) towards what (or who) has come. It’s a very descriptive term, but we are not content to leave it at that. We must add structure to the season to pin it down and fix its form. It always has exactly four Sundays which we count off with our advent wreathes like clockwork. The third Sunday, the half-way point, is set apart, given a distinctive pink candle to highlight our progress.

But our attempts to corral Advent and control it run into conflicts with our attempts to do the same for Christmas. Christmas comes every year on December 25, not just any day of the month. We have fixed it to that specific date, like the birthday it is, to make the celebration of the coming of Christ predictable. That date, however, refuses to sit still in the week. From year to year it changes its day, falling on a one day one year, and the following the next. Sometimes, as in the difference between last year and this, it jumps even further, going from a Wednesday to a Friday. The result is that the length of Advent is
constantly in flux. It can range anywhere from 22 to 28 days in length, leaving our attempts at control somewhat in ruins.

Now we could talk about how this is a side effect of the incomeseral temporal quantities of the lunar period (upon which the week is based) and the solar period (upon which the year is based) and that a pattern does emerge if one is willing to consider a large enough time scale, but really such technicalities are merely attempts to rationalize and create an illusion of control that we don’t really have. It’s far more instructive to realize that we don’t control when God acts in the world, let alone the coming of Christ.

And this is the message from the first reading. No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen the way God chooses to act. The ancient Jews expected the Messiah to come in power; to restore the royal throne of David and cast out the occupying power of the day whether it be the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, or Romans. Instead, they got a child born in a stable and laid in a manger. A boy who grew up in an obscure, backwards town in the middle of nowhere. A man who preached to the outcast, supped with sinners, and was eventually killed as a common criminal. Christ’s first coming was nothing like what was expected.

Now as we prepare to remember and celebrate that first coming, we also await the second. This is not something we can control, much as we might like. When will it come? What will it be like? Even the Apostles themselves wanted to know the answer to these questions and put them to Jesus in the Gospel just before the passage we heard today. And the answer he gave them? It is not for anyone save the Father to know the day or the hour. They, and we, are not to know when Christ will return. All we can do is watch and wait. The mode of that return, too, is likely to be beyond our ken. That doesn’t stop many people from trying, however. There have been plenty of people who scour Scripture looking for clues as to what the Second Coming will be like, how to tell whether their loved ones will be damned or saved (though curiously, they almost always assume that they themselves are saved), and when this event will occur. Never mind that none of these people have ever been right yet, I guarantee that there are still people out there looking for clues and basing their decisions on the expectation that the Christ will come on their schedule.

Christ, however, is not to be controlled by us. He has “wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for, such as they had not heard of from old.” As He has done in the past, so shall He do again. We cannot even begin to imagine, to hope, for specific events, a specific schedule, that will allow us to prepare, to control what is to come. We can only wait, and watch. We must remain ready for whenever Christ will come, however he might come, without any advanced knowledge.

Such anticipation is hard, stressful even, if we conceive of it as something we must do for ourselves; as a personal undertaking that is dependent on our own efforts and abilities. Such is not the case, however. We are supported in this waiting for Christ by Christ himself. If we give up our own ideas about how things are supposed to go, if we let ourselves be clay to be formed by our loving Father, then we will be made ready for the Second Coming at the appropriate time. Our responsibility is not to make things happen, or even to anticipate events so that we can have the perfect reaction. Our responsibility is to let God form us as he wills and to act out of that formation for the benefit of others.