

Giving Light until we die

Advent Sunday,
November 27, 2022

Once upon a time a little candle stood in a room filled with other candles, most of them much larger and much more beautiful than she was. Some were ornate and some were rather simple, like herself. Some were white, some were blue, some were pink, and some were green. She had no idea why she was there, and the other candles made her feel rather small and insignificant.

When the sun went down and the room began to get dark, she noticed a large man walking toward her with a ball of fire on a stick. She suddenly realized that the man was going to set her on fire. "No, no!" she cried, "Aaaaagghhh! Don't burn me, please!" But she knew that she could not be heard and prepared for the pain that would surely follow. To her surprise, the room filled with light. She wondered where it came from since the man had extinguished his fire stick. To her delight, she realized that the light came from herself. Then the man struck another fire stick and, one by one, lit the other candles in the room. Each one gave out the same light that she did.

During the next few hours, she noticed that, slowly, her wax began to flow. She became aware that she would soon die. With this realization came a sense of why she had been created. "Perhaps my purpose on earth is to give out light until I die," she mused. And that's exactly what she did.

Every light and candle we see during Advent is a reminder that life on earth is the path, it is a task, a mission - it is not the goal. And that like that little candle our mission on earth is to give light until we die.

Someone who understood this was St Mother Theresa of Kolkata. A number of years ago, the letters of St Mother Teresa were published. Her letters showed that she spent most of her adult life suffering a terrible sense of darkness and loneliness in her heart. The secular news media gave a lot of publicity to these letters. They seemed to rejoice in them, as if St. Mother Teresa's experience somehow proved that God really didn't exist, that having faith in God is a foolish thing to do, that St. Mother Teresa was some kind of hypocrite for staying faithful to a God who allowed her to suffer so much.

But they missed the point completely. The point was that Mother Teresa understood the meaning of this life, and that's what gave her the strength to persevere through her trials, to carry her crosses. This life is an Advent, a journey towards Christ who is coming. And the steps of that journey are steps of self-giving, not self-indulgence, steps of self-forgetfulness, not self-centeredness.

The secular news media seemed to forget how much good Mother Teresa achieved through her suffering, how much light and hope she brought to the world, simply because she had learned this lesson so well: life on earth is the path, not the goal. She knew that her purpose on earth was to give light until she died.

It is this theme that is at the heart of the First Sunday in Advent. Our life on earth is the path on which we are to give out light until we die. How we do that is inspired by the goal that the Gospel reading and the first reading announce. Jesus speaks clearly in today's Gospel about the time when the end of this present world will be realized. He compares it to the Days of Noah. What happened in those days? We read in the Old Testament Book of Genesis about a judgment where many were swept away because of the wickedness of their lives, whereas Noah, the righteous Man and his family, and pets, were preserved, to venture forth into a new world after the flood waters subsided. Jesus is teaching us in today's Gospel that this is what it will be like at the time of His Second Coming. There will be a universal judgment where the wicked and the righteous will attain to the Resurrection of the Body. One of the clearest expressions of what this judgment will be like is found in the Book of Daniel. There we read:

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. ³ Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever¹

What a wonderful description of St Mother Theresa. She was a woman who led many to righteousness.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reiterates this teaching in these words:

At the end of time, the Kingdom of God will come in its fullness. After the universal judgment, the righteous will reign forever with Christ, glorified in body and soul. The universe itself will be renewed.²

It is this that Jesus is talking about when he compares the Second Coming to being like the days of Noah.

Our first reading from Isaiah gives us a prophecy of that renewed universe. It's a prophecy of the new creation, and of the fact that, at that time, God is going to come, and he's going to judge between the nations, between the righteous and the unrighteous, and at that time people are going to beat their swords, which would be used for war, into plowshares, and their spears, which would be used in battle, into pruning hooks. In other words, there is going to be an end to warfare. It's going to be a time of peace, a time of salvation, and nation shall not lift up swords against nation, and there shall not be any war anymore. Clearly that is referring to a new creation, a new heavens and a new earth, in which strife and conflict between peoples will completely cease, and God will judge between the righteous and the wicked.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Da 12:2–3). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

² Catholic Church. (2000). [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#) (2nd Ed., p. 272). United States Catholic Conference.

Now with all this in mind, let's turn to the reading from Romans. Here St Paul says that the Advent Season is like an alarm clock. A time when we are to awake from a spiritual slumber. And what is the reason he gives for this:

For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.

By this he means that the approaching judgment, be it the personal judgement we will face at death, or the universal judgment that will be experienced by all at the Second Coming is something we need to be ready for. Because we are moving inexorably towards that goal we are to be like that candle, like St Mother Theresa in our earthly life. We are to put on the armour of light as we travel the path of this world towards our ultimate goal.

Traveling the path to our true destination involves a constant effort to be true to our Christian identity, to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." Now is the time, St Paul wrote, to "throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." The works of darkness are the different forms of self-indulgence that can distract us from our destination. Paul summarizes them as reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy.

These "desires of the flesh", as he calls them, are not evil because they are physical - God made our bodies, the world, and our capacity to experience pleasure; all those are good things. But they become evil when they take control of our lives. When we become slaves of self-centeredness and self-indulgence, we become like black holes: turned in on ourselves, collapsing and destroying everything that comes into our field of gravity.

But we are called to put on the armor of light, to be like bright stars, like suns, burning with love for God and neighbor, shedding light to everyone around us by seeking what is good for them, just as Christ sought only what was good for us. The Advent candles are an image of the mission each Christian has during Advent: to consume ourselves giving light and warmth to those around us, and passing on our flame to them.

In conclusion listen to the Counsel of St Mother Theresa who in writing to a supporter called her to give light until she died:

Thanks you very much for your kind letter, and your prayers. God loves you for the love you have for His poor. You too can do to Jesus little acts of love, through your kind smile, your loving words, your care and concern for others – first to your own. Even a simple smile can mean so much to those who are lonely, unloved, unwanted. Let us be carriers of God's love to everyone around us. God Bless You