

**Homily for November 28, 1999  
1st Sunday of Advent Cycle B**

**By Father Charles Bowes**

**Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7  
1Corinthians 1:3-9  
Mark 13:33-37**

## *Advent... a time to “get real.”*

As a child, I thought that Advent was an artificial thing. It seemed a forced time of year; a concoction to get us excited about the coming of Christmas. It felt almost fake.

After all, the birth of Christ happened a long time ago. What was the point of pretending that it hadn't? It is like going through the motions of contrived expectancy when we knew the outcome in advance. Of course, I was looking at Christmas as settling totally on a Jesus of the past, of coming long ago as an infant. I didn't realize that the Church used Advent to look at the coming of Jesus and of Jesus' God in the future, in the present, as well as in the past.

I now see Advent differently. The cycle of the seasons that we as a worshipping people live through each year is not an exercise in “let's pretend” at all. It's an ongoing journey into deeper reality. It is a recognition that the entry of God into our lives, while a done deed, is still unfinished – it's still coming and it's already here.

As long as we breathe, there is more of our lives to open, to unbar, to unlock. There is always more of us that we might let God enter. There is no end to the ways that the Word of God can more fully take on our flesh.

This is especially true of our need to acknowledge how utterly we rely on God's healing power for our salvation. We so much want to be full and finished that our great temptation is to think and hope the task is done. Oh, if this conversion could only be our last. If this long journey of faith could be neat, final, and complete.

Embarrassed as we all are at the wounds we bear and the scars hidden at the bottom of our being, we only reluctantly admit our vulnerability. We would rather not be reminded, once again, of our need for redemption. Far more tempting is escape, far more appealing is the prospect that we can sleepwalk through life and not address the pain.

“Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come,” says Jesus in Mark chapter 13. These words may be read not only as a warning about the end times, but as a challenge for us to live in the present, to engage life now, to be attentive to the moment at hand. It is the call of Advent itself. Be awake. Do not put off the opening of our life to God.

Denial and postponement are especially true in the matter of our sins, those wounds that we somehow inflict upon ourselves and others – all those unloving choices. Repression of the truth is common. Admission and reform are rare. We project, we accuse, we complain, we evade, we distract ourselves. We just are not adept at

confession. And yet confession is something we sorely need...and something we schedule yearly at this time. Our communal service this year takes place on Thursday, December 9. In preparation for the millennium, at the request of the Holy Father, we have extended our Saturday times for confession by one-half hour.

In our own place in time, we have made a science of escape and sleep. Rather than live at that sharp edge of life, awake and alert, we pretend that we have no sin. There is nothing wrong with me, no change required of us. Others need the help. My coworkers, my friends, my community, my family are to blame. "Evil empires," "war lords," "endless enemies," are the source of our problems. Bishops or feminists, conservatives or leftists, liberation theologians or church officials are the favorite demons of choice. We who work in the church are not especially noted for our willingness to confess our own sins and welcome repentance. At best, one part of the church will attack the other. But how uncommon it is to hear theologians acknowledge the sinfulness of the theologian – unless it is the theologian of the opposite persuasion. How scarce is the hierarchy's confession of guilt. How unusual it is to hear the right wing warn us of conservatives' sins. How rare is the liberal who admits the possible disorders of liberalism.

Every Eucharist, like every Advent, begins with a call for repentance and a plea for mercy. But how real is it for us? How awake, how open are we to the truth of our inadequacy and the entrance of God into our lives? How willing are we to make the words of Isaiah our own: "Why do you let us wander from your ways and harden our heart so that we fear you not? We are sinful, unclean people; our good deeds are like polluted rags. We have been delivered up to guilt," says Isaiah 63.

What a hierarchy, what a priesthood, what a people of God we would be if we allowed such sentiments to be our own. But we recoil from the implications. They would have us change. They would make a difference in the way we look at the world. They would unmask too many of the pretenses and postures we have assumed.

The theme of Advent is not, "Let's pretend." It is, "Get real." Here. Now. Make real the need for God. Make real God's entry. Make real the world – not just as a text or a story, but as a disclosure of truth. Not only is God revealed to us. You and I, here and now, are revealed to ourselves.

Thus, every Advent is an opportunity. Together, we might once again experience the word of God taking flesh in us. And having allowed God such profound entry, we may find ourselves giving birth anew to word in our world – the very word we receive at this table – of word and bread and cup.

The philosopher Diogenes was sitting on a curbstone eating bread and lentils for his supper. He was approached by the philosopher Aristippus, who lived comfortably by flattering the king. Said Aristippus, "If you learn to be subservient to the king, you would not have to live on lentils. Said Diogenes, "Learn to live on lentils, and you will not have to cultivate the king."

Advent...a time to "get real."