1st Sunday in Advent 2022

On Monday last we learnt of a major earthquake on the island of Java, which is part of Indonesia. The news reports have shown us the devastation it has caused. We currently have a number of Indonesian students living in the parish who frequently join us for Sunday Mass – let us pledge to them our prayers for their people back home.

We often ask, “Why do such tragedies happen?” While we may be able to find a scientific answer, for example, in the shifting of tectonic plates, we have no answer as to why so many innocent people in our world suffer. But in relation to this question, Jesus in today’s Gospel passage, shares with us an observation - he says, *“As it was in Noah’s day….before the Flood, people were eating, drinking, taking wives, taking husbands, right up to the day Noah went into the ark, and they suspected nothing till the Flood came and swept all away”* This passage will remind many of us of an earlier earthquake close to the coast of Indonesia. It happened on 26th December 2004, and, as it was undersea, it caused a huge tsunami – waves, up to a hundred feet high, crashed on to surrounding coasts, and upon the unsuspecting inhabitants. The devastation was on a massive scale - whole communities were swept away, and almost a quarter of a million people perished,. Although Jesus does not answer our heartfelt question as to why the suffering in the world, he does alert us to an obvious fact, that the only thing we can be sure about the unexpected, is that when it does come it will be unexpected!

It is most unlikely that nature will inflict an earthquake or a tsunami upon us, yet, on the other hand, experience has taught us all that a traumatic event can suddenly crash over us when we lease expect it, leaving us utterly bewildered. There is not a person here, nor a family in our parish, who hasn’t experienced some trauma or other – perhaps a serious health issue, or a sudden death in the family, or a relationship suddenly falling apart, or perhaps a work situation gone sour. While we can accept that such things happen, it is important to understand the precise point that Jesus is making when he speaks about the unexpected. He is not saying that it is a punishment for bad behaviour – that is not the point. What he is stressing is how life-changing and totally indiscriminate events can suddenly and unexpectedly burst upon us; *“Then of two men in the fields one is taken, one left; of two women at the millstone grinding, one is taken, one left.”* St. Paul calls out to us; *“wake up...give up all the thing we prefer to do under the cover of dark...let us appear in the light. Let us live decently”,* for *w*ho knows what will happen tomorrow, next week, next month? Someone has suggested a fitting slogan for today might be, “Don’t sleepwalk through life!”

Today we begin the four weeks of Advent – the season that introduces us to the “mystery of waiting”. Our society is impatient with waiting, it bores us, and often irritates us – perhaps this is why Christmas trees are erected, and Christmas celebrations begin, often weeks before Christmas. But waiting has a value – nature itself teaches us this, because although it appears that nature sleeps through the winter, it is in fact actively waiting for the wonder of spring.

We too wait, preparing to open our hearts in welcome to the Lord. So, Advent is not just a run up to Christmas - it has a serious purpose – it is a time for each of us to pause and ask, “How are things with me? How am I, in my mind, in my heart, and in my soul?” Life, today, for so many, can be very pressurised, full of cares and distractions. Harassed by the urgent, it is all too easy to lose sight of the real priorities of life. And it is to these priorities that Advent seeks to alert us. The scriptures advise us not to allow the unexpected to catch us unawares. Jesus tells us that curious little story about the householder who *“had he known at what time of the night the burglar would come, he would have stayed awake”* and not have allowed the burglar to break into his house. St. Augustine once claimed that it was by design that Jesus hid our last day from us so that we would be on the lookout for him every day of our lives. Augustine also advised that we should live each day as if it is our last! That, in fact, is a good summary of today's Gospel.

*Lord Jesus,*

*you caution us*

*to stay awake and to stand ready,*

*because the Son of Man is coming*

*at an hour we do not expect.*

*As we do so,*

*may we open our eyes*

*to the misery of world,*

*and do what we know to be right*

*mindful of your commandment of love.* **Amen.**