

1st Sunday Advent Year B

December 3, 2017

Readings: Isaiah 63: 16-17, 19; 64:2-7; 1 Cor. 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

If you delay, it is over. I recall the first time I bid on a baseball card eBay many years ago. I was trying to calculate how many seconds it would take to complete my transaction bid, so that I could bid at the last possible moment. Even assuming that they had a maximum bid, I was trying to guess what it might be, while not allowing them enough time for a counter bid. And this was for a baseball card!

The first time, I failed...I was late by a few seconds. Fool me once! The next time, I won, completing my bid two seconds before the expiration of the bidding. Small victory. But I also realized how potentially addicting online bidding could be. I immediately decided quit while I was ahead. The simple lesson here... if you wait too long, you lose! This year, if you desire a fruitful Advent season, you had better not wait. The clock is already ticking.

According to my calculations, beginning with the Saturday 5:15pm Mass until a minute before midnight on Christmas Eve, this Advent is only 22 days, 6 hours and 44 minutes long. It's the shortest possible Advent with Christmas falling on a Monday. [**8:00 Mass**- 21 Days, 15 hours, 59 minutes; **10:00 Mass** 21, 13 hours, 59 minutes]

The great 20th century poet T.S. Eliot began his monumental work *The Four Quartets* with a reflection on time. It reads:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.¹

Eliot's poem is situated in a tranquil garden, symbolic of the reality of the present. As one commentator wrote: "To live in the temporal

¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*, "Burnt Norton," lines 1-5.

world means to remain unredeemed, unliberated, in bondage to the ravages of time...”²

We can live our lives thinking endlessly about either what could have been in our lives, if only this or that had happened. In the process, we lose sight of the present. Time is meaningful as it is here and now. Since the coming of Christ, time has a Christian meaning. While Jesus was born in time, the Word is eternal.

Ecclesial and liturgical time is very real, even as it stretches us to yearn for that which is not yet present. It is cyclic. Today, we usher in a new liturgical year. Time begins yet again. Advent, especially in the First Sunday, points us far beyond Christmas, which as we know, was an event in the past. It points us to the final advent of God, the Second Coming of Christ.

We both yearn for Christmas, bringing to the present, making real, this transformative event of the past, even as we look towards the fulfillment of all time in Christ’s return. Because of this masterful interplay among past, present and future, Advent is a singular experience in the Church, and one that sadly, has been lost on all but the few willing to risk living its precepts.

We are called to yearn, and not yet anticipate too fully the reality for which we yearn. Society extends the “holiday season” from Thanksgiving until Christmas Day, and then all its signs and symbols disappear in a heap in the alley to be hauled away. [Tell story of decorations being taken down **before** Christmas years ago in a school where I taught...Maintenance said, “Students are gone till January 5. What difference does it make?”] I was mortified!

Time used to be measured by the sun and people went to great lengths to chart its course. Visual markers of these calculations may be seen in the Piazza at St. Peter’s Basilica. During a December 2008

² cf. Terry Fairchild, *Time and Eternity in Eliot’s Four Quartets*, page 59.

Angelus, Pope Benedict XVI reminded the faithful of this fact from his Residence window:

“... perhaps not everyone knows that in St Peter's Square there is also a meridian; in fact, the great obelisk casts its shadow in a line that runs along the paving stones toward the fountain beneath this window and in these days, the shadow is at its longest of the year. This reminds us of the role of astronomy in setting the times of prayer. The *Angelus*, for example, is recited in the morning, at noon and in the evening, and clocks were regulated by the meridian which in ancient times made it possible to know the ‘exact midday.’”³

The sun falls on a precise place marked in the square on the Spring or Fall Equinox. The Church is enveloped in time and yet the message of Christ remains the same. We cannot however, remain static. We either move forward spiritually, or we retreat. The one thing we cannot do is remain static.

Let us thank the Church for this great gift of time for reflection and commit ourselves to making the most out of this shortest of all seasons, marking sacred time by encountering Christ in the sacraments, He who is eternally present in our lives.

³ Benedict XVI, Angelus Address, St. Peter's Basilica Piazza, 21 December 2008.