

First Sunday of Advent 2024 C

I shared this experience three years ago; but I offer it again as a way to enter Advent. Though I have celebrated well over a thousand funerals over the years, I still remember the smallest funeral I ever had – one grand-niece, two parishioners, the funeral director, and me. This gentleman had come from China in the 1930s. His family was not able to join him, nor was he able to return to them. They never saw one another again – a story written over and over in human history. ***In that long separation, how often he must have pictured the faces of his loved ones as he remembered them.*** Did the passage of time make their separation easier, or even harder? Sometimes, we can grow so far apart that we might not even recognize people once close to us, and we may even fear seeing them again ... would I recognize them? Would we still have anything in common? Have I become a stranger to someone I once knew and loved so well? ***Yet still, love means that we long to see and be with those dear to us, united by a bond stronger than change and time and circumstance.***

This is the meaning of Advent for us – to prepare to see Jesus, to look upon His face, not with fear but hope and joy. How we picture that Face comes from images we have seen: paintings, statues, crucifixes. We have no artwork depicting Jesus made during His life; even the Shroud of Turin shows an image only after death. Jesus left nothing in writing. But this is fitting, since art and books act as remembrances of people once they are gone; but Jesus is risen, still among us. Passing time means that means WE have changed, but Jesus is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.

To see the face of Jesus – this is not only an exercise of meditation in prayer, but the very core of Christian faith. God’s people in the Old Testament identified themselves precisely by this desire: ***“let your face shine upon us and we shall be saved; this is the people that longs to see your face.”*** The Face of Jesus reminds us that God promises, not just a message, but a Presence; just not words and ideas, but a Savior Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. As people of Advent Faith, we are waiting, not for

something, but for **Someone** – One Who knows us, cares about us, seeks to comfort us; Someone Who comes today in hidden ways through grace, but is also coming visibly at the end of time to bring, not fear, but salvation; not God’s vengeance, but God’s Mercy. ***Jesus shows us the face of God, a face that looks upon us with human eyes and divine love***. Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the Magi, the Apostles and the crowds saw that Face 20 centuries ago ... as an infant, a little boy, a teenager, a young man, a carpenter and rabbi. They saw Him teaching and healing; in laughter and in tears; in prayer and in sleep, in power and in suffering – that human face born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, dying outside of Jerusalem, but always looking back with God’s love. ***That look sustained the faith of this Chinese man through his long years away from family and homeland; we pray that they are reunited in the place of life and joy God has prepared for them after their sufferings.***

I think there is also a deeper reason why we have no recorded image of Jesus in His lifetime: so that we can more easily see His face in the members of His Body, in the persons around us, especially those we tend to overlook or disregard. I too can struggle to see the face of Jesus in the stranger, in the sick, in those with whom I disagree. We can also overlook those who are familiar to us – in our families and neighborhoods and workplaces – people we take for granted.

The days are coming when we will see Jesus, we are assured. So take some time each Advent day, even a few minutes, to sit with Jesus in prayer, and ask Him: Lord, show Me your Face. Make me vigilant and let me recognize You wherever you meet me today.” This Advent, we wait ... not for something, but Someone. May the living presence of Jesus renew our hope to say: ***“Lord, this is the people that longs to see your Face.”***