

***First Sunday of Advent 2015 – St. Joseph’s Parish, Ottawa
Year C
Reflection: Joe Gunn***

Maybe you’ve heard the story of Christmas dinner at Richard’s house? He always served succulent baked ham, prepared according to the age-old recipe that had become a delicious family tradition. But last year, that tradition was called into question...

You see, his young niece Stephanie, just before grace, asked, “Uncle Richard, why do you always cook the ham in two big pieces?” Richard was a bit taken aback. “Why Stephanie,” he muttered, “That’s the way we’ve always done it in this family.” He turned to his sister, Stephanie’s mom, for help. “Sis, don’t you always cut your ham in two before baking it?” “Sure,” came her immediate reply, “It tastes better that way. That’s the way mom always baked the ham.”

After the big dinner and cleaning the kitchen, all the family traipsed off to see Grandma in her retirement home. Once there, however, Stephanie was not about to be deterred...

“Grandma” she asked, “Mommy and Uncle Richard say you always used to cut your ham before baking it. Why did you do that?”

“Well,” said Grandma, “No big secret. I had to feed this whole mess of kids and I never had a pan that was big enough to fit a whole ham.”

So will we prepare for Christmas in the traditional way?

Today marks the first Sunday of Advent. Does that fact strike cold fear into your heart, when you think of all the important things you need to get done in the next month?

Please don’t think of all the things on your list to accomplish before the 25th...the Christmas cleaning, shining up the silverware, bringing out special decorations, hanging lights, getting a Christmas tree – and then the baking and meal planning,

not to mention the frantic holiday shopping - please let's not even think of all that.

You see, the challenge that the Church asks us to consider in today's readings is how we might enter into this season of great expectations with a commitment to do something differently,
to be changed,
to be renewed.

Advent is the build-up towards the Feast of the Incarnation – we need this time to prepare, and we need to consider how to use this time well.

And we need – to use religious language – to be converted.

The question before us is: will we do anything different this year, that could make Advent 2015 more meaningful?

There are some hints towards what we might do to mark Advent in today's readings.

Jeremiah suggests the coming of Our Lord will be obvious because “he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” Justice and righteousness...! Paul's letter to the Thessalonians offers that the Lord's coming should be a time when “love abounds.” And Luke's Gospel encourages us to remember that Christ came into the world at Christmas, but will also return at the end of time – so our preparation for that should also be on our agendas – beyond the frenzied activity of this next month.

This Advent we could take some time to ponder some of what Pope Francis is challenging us to consider.

Francis wrote the first-ever encyclical on “care for our common home” (*Laudato Si'*) last June. Few of us are going to read the 190 pages, or 40,000 words of that message. But in short, as Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez has stated, *Laudato Si'* represents “a new *Rerum Novarum*” – a new moment in Catholic Social Thought.

Francis has been constantly speaking about what he calls “an integral ecology” – that which, he says, takes us to the heart of being human.

The pope writes:

“Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded.” (LS #13)

The pope understands we face “not two separate crises...but one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.” (LS #139)

Francis says we must hear both “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.” (LS #49)

Last week the Vatican sent a letter to every bishop in the world, asking them to “offer your support in prayer, word and action” to the Global Climate March – a series of 2,3000 rallies worldwide taking place one day before the start of the Climate Summit in Paris. The Vatican invited bishops to “offer the celebration of the Eucharist” on Sunday November 29th (today) the day of the March, “for a responsive and successful international conference and summit.” I’m glad that St. Joe’s has accepted this invitation at today’s liturgies, and it’s gratifying to know that several of us will join the March here at City Hall after the 11:30 Mass. It’s hopeful to note that Archbishop Paul-André Durocher of Gatineau and Ottawa’s Archbishop Terry Prendergast will participate in the March with us.

Canada’s bishops also joined 65 other faith community leaders in signing on to a statement on climate justice, ending poverty, and respecting the rights of Indigenous people. In terms of the Paris Climate Summit, these church leaders called for 3 things: for the federal government to “positively influence negotiations in Paris to conclude a binding international agreement;” to “establish more stringent and ambitious emissions reductions targets in Canada;” and “provide material assistance to assist the poorest and most affected countries...”

These elements are what we need to see Canada commit to when the Paris Summit draws to a close.

Of course, there are other ways to reflect, sing, pray and act for climate justice this Advent. (see website on slide.)

There are worship resources available: prayer ideas, sample homilies from a Catholic bishop and other ecumenical leaders, and other resources on-line. You can join the “Prayer Chain” and commit to praying for an hour during the week-long Paris Summit, and you can add your name to a petition that will be presented to the Canadian government delegation when they arrive in Paris. (Pope Francis himself signed a similar petition circulating in Europe!)

You know, here in Catholic churches in Canada, we have a privileged opportunity to make Advent observance come alive through our participation in the work of the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace. This is the organization currently fundraising to support refugees in camps throughout the Middle East, and this is the organization that asked for our signatures on the climate petition that circulated in our parish these last few Sundays. They seem to understand what Pope Francis means when he calls for an “integral ecology.” We can be thankful that a delegation of D&P members will be in Paris next week, and that D&P members from many towns will make their presence known in today’s Climate Marches.

There’s a Chinese proverb that was probably not written with Advent in mind, **“If you do not change direction, you may end up where you’re heading.”** In terms of the climate challenge, we don’t want to end up “where we’re heading.”

God’s love came into the world, God’s Spirit touched human history in a whole new way that first Christmas. God’s light came among us – but we can always choose to block out that light. We Christians believe that Christ’s birth made everything different – this Advent, we don’t have to prepare for Christmas as indistinguishable members of the consumer culture that engulfs us, that excludes so many, and that damages the earth. We don’t even have to cook that ham in the same old way...

We can start to become the change we want to see, the journey of change towards that “integral ecology” that upon which Advent invites us to embark.