
HOMILY OF THE MOST REV. DONALD BOLEN, ARCHBISHOP OF REGINA



**First Sunday of Advent
Sunday, 28 November 2021**

Today's Readings:

1st Reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16;

2nd Reading: 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2 ;

Gospel: Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, on this First Sunday of the liturgical year, we begin our Advent journey towards the birth of Jesus, who comes to show us the face of God's faithful and boundless love for us. In the readings of Advent, especially the first readings from the prophets, we hear of the promises of God, promises often expressed in terms of a covenantal relationship. At the heart of that covenant is God's promise, "I will be your God and you will be my people." In today's first reading from Jeremiah and in the psalm, we hear some components of that covenant. Jeremiah assures us that God desires and promises justice, which is part of God's covenantal faithfulness. The Psalm introduces the image of being on a path, of walking together, with the Creator teaching us, showing us the way. "Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths." And the path God invites us to walk on is a path of truth. "Guide me in your truth and teach me."

This Advent, we in Catholic parishes across Canada will be accompanying in prayer the delegation of Indigenous Peoples to Rome, where they will speak to Pope Francis of some truths that are difficult to hear, including how we in the church have been the source of some deep pain and wounds. This Advent we are being invited to listen, to come to know, and in the words of our penitential rite, to acknowledge what we as church - and as society - have done and what we have failed to do in the history of relationship with Indigenous Peoples.

When we ponder that history through an Advent lens and attentive to the theme of covenant, we do well to ponder the role that treaties with many First Nations Peoples have played and could continue to play as we seek to find a good way to walk together. Treaties numbered in what is now Western Canada were signed beginning in 1871 promised tracts of land, annuities, the right to hunt, trap and fish, schools and teachers to educate children, and a new way to make a living through agriculture. In these treaties, First Nations Peoples did not sell or give up their rights to the land and territories. They agreed to share custodial responsibility and stewardship for the land entrusted to them by the Creator to whom the land ultimately belonged. Several of the treaties included the understanding that they would be in place “as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the waters flow.” Indeed I am speaking to you from Treaty 4 Territory, the traditional lands of the Nêhiyawak, Nahkawé, and Nakota, and homeland of the Dakota, Lakota, and Métis peoples. But government promises made to care for the land, to respect it and to share it with First Nations Peoples were soon broken. Hunting and trapping, and fishing rights were curtailed. The treaties were followed by the Indian Act, an illegal pass system which restricted the travel of First Nations Peoples, a residential school system which took children from their parents, and a history of systemic marginalization and oppression. We acknowledge this today not to evoke guilt or shame, but to name clearly the legacy that is ours to engage with at this moment in history.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus invites his disciples to be alert. Often in Advent readings we hear this imperative from the Lord: stay awake. In various ways, we as church and as society have not been fully awake to Indigenous Peoples, their experiences, their gifts and wisdom, their suffering. The Truth and Reconciliation process has in some sense taken us all to school, inviting us to read our history through Indigenous eyes. I have personally come to the recognition that the history that I was taught about this land and its peoples was distorted and impoverished by its lack of Indigenous perspectives. It is time for us to wake up to that history. One person put it this way to me recently: there is ‘the history I studied’ and ‘the history I am now learning’. That ought to include an understanding of treaty relationships, and the ways in which we are called to be allies in the Indigenous pursuit of justice, allies in support of a covenantal relationship with all peoples of this land which truly respects and acknowledges Indigenous rights, Indigenous wisdom regarding the created world and the interconnectedness of all of creation. Staying awake today calls for learning to be deeply attentive to Indigenous insights about what it would look like to walk together in a good way in our day.

I would like to close with excerpts of a beautiful prayer from Joseph Chiwatenhwa, a member of the Bear Clan of the Wendat Peoples in the early 17th century, which we can make our own:

O God, at last I start to understand you.
You made the earth, which we live in.
You made the sky, which we see above us.
You made us, we who are called people.

Now you let me start to know who you really are.
I know how to make a canoe, and how to enjoy it.
I know how to build a cabin and how to live in it.
But you! You made us, and you live in us.

The things we make last for a few seasons.
We only use the canoes we create for a short time.
We only live in the houses we build for a few years.
But your love for us will endure so long
that we cannot count the time.
You will comfort us forever.

Lord God, Creator of all that is, teach us to walk in your paths, to walk together even as you walk with us. Walk with the Indigenous delegation to Rome, and with all of us upon their return, that we might be true artisans of healing, justice and reconciliation. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.