

First Sunday of Advent (A)

- Outside the United Nations building is a spectacular bronze sculpture entitled "Let Us Beat Swords Into Ploughshares" that I saw in 1980.
- It seems ironic to me that the sculptor is Evgeniy Vuchetich, an esteemed Soviet sculptor & artist well-known for his heroic sculptures.
- In 1959, he was given the "People's Artist of the USSR" award.
- The sculpture was gifted to the United Nations by the USSR after the Second World War in 1959 & was presented on behalf of the Soviet Delegation.
- It depicts the figure of a man, holding a hammer aloft in one hand & a sword in the other hand, hammering the sword into a ploughshare, a tool to till land for crops & it is based on today's first reading from Isaiah.
- It's meant to symbolize humanity's desire to put an end to war & transform tools of destruction into tools that benefit humanity.
- What an appropriate image in our time as we prepare for the coming of Christ that we celebrate at Christmas, & it well reflects the theme of this week – "Trust & keep awake" in that the season of Advent is not just a passive awaiting, but an active preparation of ourselves.
- The great Advent journey begins & the Advent readings are a rich tapestry of images centred on our belief that God has come among us.
- We don't pretend that we are waiting for Jesus to be born in a stable - that happened once, a long time ago, & it will not happen again.
- We remember that birth as we remember our own birthdays.
- The God who came among us is still among us in a different way.
- Advent's invitation is to become aware of the all-pervading presence of the risen Jesus as Emmanuel – God among us, as a God who enlightens us & enables us to think & do in imaginative, creative ways things that are consistent with the ways God thinks; that our efforts in making a good difference in our lives & world can be consistent with what God wants for us.
- In the first reading this Sunday Isaiah captures the sense of God's presence among his people through the images of the high mountain & the Temple – the dwelling place of God among his people.
- The people's response in the reading is to be drawn into God's presence *'that he may teach us his ways'* & *'we may walk in his paths'*, & be utterly transformed into a new way of living, eg, making swords into ploughshares.
- In the second reading St Paul reminds the Romans that they are already living in *'the time'* - they should *'wake up now'* & *'live decently as people do in the daytime'*.

- The early Christians believed that Jesus would return very soon as the Lord of Glory, but as time passed, they had to re-think this belief & work out how to live in the *meantime*, the time in between the first & final comings of Christ.
- This week's Gospel calls us to "stay awake", to be vigilant & attentive to the signs of the times so that we don't miss the moment when God breaks into human history once again - the God who came among us is still among us.
- In Advent we train our eyes to see the reign of God more clearly so that we may be totally caught up in God's action in the world as we wait for the final manifestation of God's glory.
- Saint Augustine summed up the mood of this season well when he prayed: *'You have made us for yourself, O God, & our hearts are restless till they rest in you'*.
- Our hearts are made for God; our deepest self longs for communion with God, & that means to live in harmony with others in the present.
- During Advent we are meant to taste this restlessness & this longing, to be moved deeply by signs that things aren't in harmony, & to take stock of our lives, to check our direction & to await with expectation the special grace that God promises to offer us in his making his home among us.
- Other Advent readings focus on our longing for the final coming of Christ in glory.
- We are advised to avoid useless speculation about the manner & timing of what we customarily refer to as 'the end of the world', but we also know in faith that God has promised 'a renewed creation'.
- Part of the challenge & privilege of being a human being is to make our contribution to building a better world, a home where human beings can live in dignity & justice, as we nurture each other in love in the now.
- While we work here to honour the trust Jesus placed in us when he asked us to *'love one another as I have loved you'*, we know that, ultimately, for us as for Jesus himself, our longing is for the life that is beyond death: the life of communion with God we speak of as 'heaven'.
- But Advent is primarily about the present.
- So, on this First Sunday of Advent, we might ask: What are my deepest longings? for myself? for those I love?
- What can I do to respond to the God who desires those things for me as well, & gives us signs of his desire for me?
- And going back to the sculpture – what are your proverbial swords that you have honed over the years to use in anger, aggression, to get your own way, or even out of defence?
- In what ways do you need to be awakened so you can beat them into plowshares of love for all those you touch in your lives.