

On warm summer evenings when I was a child, we used to play "Hide and Seek". Whoever was "it" closed his eyes and counted to 100, and everyone else ran to hide. Then when 100 had been reached, IT called out "ready or not, here I come". He then went out to find the others.

We have always been playing hide and seek with God. Adam and Eve heard God walking in the Garden, and they tried to hide themselves. But whether they were ready or not, God found them.

This is Advent and it appropriate to think along those lines for on the first Christmas night, whether the world was ready or not, God came....and some received him and some did not.

But more than that, in this present time, the Lord comes to this world whether it is ready or not. Whether we want him or not, we are confronted by his presence. And this first Sunday in Advent our theme is the Lord who came in the past, who is coming today, and who will come at the end of time.

1. It is our faith that on a specific night, in a special place, in a particular person, God came to this world. It was the advent of God, the creator visiting his creation.

Not every one was ready for him to come. There was not room in the inn. Herod wasn't ready. How could a ruling king be ready for another king. The scribes and Pharisees, the rich and the powerful....they were already in command, so they had

no need for a savior.

2

But there were a few, apparently, who were ready and they opened their lives to him...publicans, sinners, etc needed mercy...they wanted acceptance, they were ready for help, they knew they were sick. They received him gladly, they ate and drank with him...some left everything they had and followed him.

So today, at the start of this Christmas season, we remember the past and that first Christmas when Jesus came to a world part ready and part not ready. A few accepted him but most rejected but there was no doubt in the hearts of the believers that God came into the world.

Before we turn to the present time, let us note one thing more. The first Christmas story is not a story of men and women who finally found God. It is a story of a God who confronted men and women, who took them by surprise, who found them. Mary and Joseph didn't search for God, he came and amazed them. Peter and Paul weren't looking for God, but both of them suddenly found themselves face to face with the divine. And even those who didnot accept him, they still had to deal with him . . the scribes, the pharasees, Herod.

The very religious society we live in today is full of techniques and methods by which you can climb to heaven and find God. For a fee, you can learn systems on how to discover the divine and to gain access to the meaning of life. All

these religious "How to Find God" are at best misleading. (3)

The problem is not how to find God. The problem is, ready or not, God has found us and we can no longer equivocate. We must either say YES or NO.

2. That leads us from the past tense to the present tense. Christmas and Advent is not just a time to look back and take a sentimental journey in our imagination to the little town of Bethlehem.

In advent we open our eyes to the Lord who is even now breaking into this world and who at this very moment is active in our world. Our faith is not about a philosophy of life, we do not trust in a set of ideas about God. Our Lord is not just a memory, locked in creeds and buried safely under 19 centuries of religion.

No, ours is a living Lord, who, ready or not, is coming to life and intruding into our lives . . . and there is no hiding place where we can crouch and avoid his presence. There is no darkness that can cover us.

But the Lord who comes is only visible to eyes of faith. We see the Lord everywhere, not only in the words of the Bible, not only in the bread and wine, but in our lives and in the history of the human race. Sometimes we see ourselves receiving him, sometimes rejecting him.

Can you recall a time when you were separated, stuck with your old self, weak and in pain? And then something happened?

Perhaps forgiveness was experienced, or maybe love broke through your loneliness. Maybe you heard a healing word from the (4) scripture or from the pulpit. Or maybe you experienced the amazing grace as you knelt in prayer. Or maybe someone spoke to you in a voice that cared. And you knew you were not alone.

Our eyes of faith know that, however renewal came to you, God was there...the bread and wine, in the words of scripture, in the voice of a friend. The Lord was breaking in to bring you from death to life.

But there are those moments when the Lord appears and is rejected. Since God is the only source of life, when you and I reject him, we are rejecting life.

Can't you recall those times when we heard the voice of God and shut our ears and turned our eyes away, and tried to hide from him? And can't you remember the price we paid in fear and pain, in frustration and anxiety that came when we tried to go it alone..without chart and compass to guide with only the darkness closing in around us?

John puts it this way: "And this is the judgement, that light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light"... "He came unto his own, but his own received him not". (John 3:19; John 1:11)

That is a good text for Advent 1979. We live in a world which has for a long time been systematically rejecting the Lord. Slowly, but surely, our world has convinced itself

that God is superfluous. We have reason, technology, power, ⁵ know-how. This is the 20th century; we have the atom and computers, we have dollars but little sense, we have spaceships and nuclear warheads. And it is hard to fit God into this televised, plasticized, automated and programmed world of ours. There is little room for the living God.

What price are we paying. Well we know too well. Read the newspapers...not just the sports and funnies. If we do, we will see the world which has chosen darkness rather than light. And God lets us walk in darkness. Let us pray that we shall soon turn to the light while there is yet time.

3. But that is not the last word. Thank God for that. Jesus has come in the distant past; he is coming now to heal those who receive him...But that is not the final word.

This world of ours is not eternal. It has a beginning, and it will have an end. It is not a purposeless and meaningless chaos. About that we cannot speak with direct propositions and formulae. We can only hint with symbols, we can only gesture with parables, and try to speak the unspeakable.

But the story is the same...however inadequately we try to express it. The future is in God's hands. At the end the victory will not go to death and evil, it will not go to sorrow and tears, and it will not go to injustice and oppression.

We have prayed earlier: "Thy kingdom come". It will. The final victory will go to God, to life, to joy, to justice.

Whether we are ready or not, God will come and accomplish his purpose. So we live in December 1980, with the horrors of our time . . . murder, a drugged society, international tensions, starvation, inflation, taxes.

But we live with a sure and certain hope. We live in joyful expectation... for God is God. God will come again, and he will prevail.

Do you remember how the game of "hide and seek" used to end? When the game was over . . . or when some had hidden so well that "it" could not find them? "It" would call out: "All the outs in free, all the outs in free". Then it was safe to come out of hiding and to come back to hom base.

We are in the middle of the game now....but we know how it will end. We know that the one who was born at Bethlehem, and the one who comes to us today, will continue to come in the future until heaven is brought to earth. Then we will be safe...and we can come out of hiding....and we can come home free at last.