

1st Sunday of Advent (B)  
(Isaiah 63:16-17;64:1.3-8 / Mark 13:33-37)  
03.12.2017

A theme appropriate to the life of our community for this particular Advent season emerges from the page from Mark's gospel we read this morning.

The words I want to retain from the text and which I suggest we concentrate our attention on in a particular way for the coming weeks are the following: *the Lord the Master of the house*. I propose that we take those words *The Lord, the Master of the house* as a reflection/examination point for the life we share.

It is good for us to be reminded at the outset of this Advent season that it is the Lord who is *the master of the house*, the head of the household, we form together here in Kilbroney.

In saying that, words from a psalm with which we are all familiar come to mind – psalm 126 (in the Greek numbering) psalm 127 (in the Hebrew numbering). The opening line of that psalm reads: *Unless the Lord build the house, the builders' work is useless*. The same psalm then goes on to remind us that *it is senseless for the watchman to keep vigil unless the Lord is there to protect the city and it is senseless for us to give ourselves to excessive labour unless the Lord direct the work*.

The point the psalmist wants to make is that what counts in our life is the Lord's direction. As we follow His leading and guidance we are given what the psalm calls *the Lord's blessing*. Another psalm makes the point that God's blessing is given to those to whom He accords the grace to live together in love, united in His service and that of His people in His household. (cf. Psalm 132/133)

What I want to stress at the outset of these Advent days is that much more important than any building work we have undertaken here recently, of greater importance than the bricks and mortar being used around this monastery at the moment, are the *living stones* we ourselves are called to be.

What matters for the life of this monastery – any monastery – is that our community be gathered together in love and that we see ourselves as the *living stones* of God's house.

I hear the call addressed to us at this time to be an invitation to rebuild our life together.

In line with this surely the first call addressed to each one of us in community is to give thanks to the Lord for His having led us to find our home here with each other.

With the grace and privilege of having been called together to form God's household comes a responsibility: the responsibility to provide a space, to make a home, for others to come and share in our life – as guests and also eventually as members of the community.

If we are to be found fit to offer hospitality to others and to welcome new members then we must be ever ready to rebuild our life upon the one solid foundation of the Church, the One upon whom all depends and by whom all holds together: Christ-Jesus.

*Christ-Jesus Himself is the cornerstone of the house and the rock upon which we are founded*. It is Christ who holds all things together as one.

The psalmist says *Unless the Lord build the house*. Clearly, we must remember that God must be involved in the building process of our life at every step along the way.

If the Lord is not with us; if He is not leading, guiding and directing us, then, we have no hope of success because we are not truly engaged in *God's work*, what our monastic tradition calls the *Opus Dei*, but just our own project.

Much more important than any work we might undertake for God is God's own work in and through us.

The whole point of the psalm that inspires my reflection – the psalm which I propose we make our own in a special way this Advent – is that whatever we set out to do must be done in response to God’s call and not just according to our own whims and fancy.

What counts is *the Work of God* in and through us; not our work for God – however praiseworthy any undertaking of our own might appear to be to ourselves and/or to others who look on at our building work.

Without Christ being at the centre of our undertakings, whatever we do is pointless. It runs the risk of failing.

The words of the apostle Paul could not be any clearer. Writing to the Colossians he says: *Let your roots grow down into Christ, and let your lives be built upon Him*. Elsewhere – this time addressing the Ephesians – Paul insists that we must be *rooted in, planted in, built upon love*. That is, God’s love revealed in Jesus-Christ.

In the gospels Jesus states in no uncertain terms that the house will stand, no matter to what extent it is battered, as long as it built firmly upon rock. Whatever is founded upon *the rock who is Christ* (a phrase we find in the Rule of St Benedict), whatever is rooted in Him, won’t be ever shaken to the point of collapse. That does not mean that ill-winds won’t befall us. There is no guarantee that we will be preserved from storms in life. We won’t be preserved from enduring them, but they will not overcome us. Our protection is found beyond ourselves. It is not our force that counts, but God’s protecting hand and His saving strength deployed in our favour

We must always remember that the forces that tear at the constructs of our lives are too strong for any of us to handle alone. We need God’s help. We need His protection. Without the Lord at hand to watch over us and to assure our safekeeping we cannot withstand all that is and will be thrown up against us.

In the light of the teaching found in psalm 126/127, I think it fair to say that apart from the Lord, apart from active dependence upon Him, apart from trust in His grace we can do nothing that will endure. If we are forgetful of the Lord’s attention to us, His leading and guidance of us, our lives simply will not stand.

Indeed, without Christ our lives prove to be pointless, restless and fruitless.

The issues the psalm 126/127 touches on – namely, building a house, protecting a city and rejoicing in family gathered around the table at the centre of the house – are all realities we can relate to. They speak to us of construction, security and the welcoming of the blessing of new life whatever the context in which we live and serve – be that a monastery or a family home.

I believe this psalm that holds our attention in this meditation would have us ask ourselves what these three concepts amount to for us in the concrete reality of our existence. Put simply we must all ask ourselves questions such as the following:

*What are we building in our lives?*

*Are we building together with others?*

*Just what are we safeguarding? Is it of any real value?*

*Where is our blessing in life found?*

Another way of putting that would be to ask:

*To whom do we owe our lives?*

*What is it, or rather who is it, that holds us together within ourselves and with each other?*

I see the challenge being addressed to us at the outset of this Advent to be found in a little gospel passage found in chapter 7 of Matthew's gospel – the passage wherein Jesus speaks of the two possible foundations on which a house is built.

In Matthew 7:24-27 we are told that two kinds of life-building foundations are available to us. One foundation is as solid as rock – as we've seen, this foundation is in Jesus Christ. The other foundation is like shifting sand – this foundation is whatever is built upon human pride alone... all our foolish endeavours to impress others solely by appearances.

What Jesus wants us to grasp is that while our life might be outwardly impressive, if it is built upon a fickle foundation, then whenever difficult circumstances come along and ill-winds rage against us, we will find ourselves levelled to the ground. Whatever we have built – no matter how high it has risen... and often the higher it has risen – will topple, tumble and fall. All that will be left will be a heap of rubble and ourselves at the centre of it. If Christ does not hold us together – each one of us within our self and all of together with each other – then like a fragile house of cards, our life can all so easily fall apart and come crashing down around us. How much better to build our life on the solid foundation of faith in Jesus Christ than to run this risk! When Christ is our foundation, then whenever the inevitable storms of life assail us, even though we may be shaken, we will not be moved to the extent of collapse. We will stand firm and hold together.

May this Advent see us engage ourselves as community in an interior re-building project. May it see us consolidate what holds our life together: communion with Christ, communion in Christ.

Everything we seek to live here in this place depends upon our keeping in mind that the Lord alone is *the master of the house*.

In our prayer let us make our own that phrase employed by St Ephrem in the prayer our Orthodox brothers and sisters pray each day of Lent. I see this prayer as equally applicable to this Advent season: *Lord and Master of our life*.

May Christ be the Lord and Master of our personal lives and the life we share in common.