

# Advent fosters awareness of God's love

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

As the Advent season unfolds I continue to reflect on the ebb and flow of human experience.

In that process, at least as it has developed for me during this holy season, one remembers the events, realities and relationships of life and, in the remembering, begins to distinguish the lasting from the passing, the substantial from the trivial, the life-giving from those things that diminish life.

You understand of course that this kind of process is not a mechanical one. It is not precise and even at its best yields nothing resembling a computer printout.

Nor is this reflection on human experience an activity that ought to be confined to these few weeks at the beginning of the church's year.

Rather, the church, by means of its Advent invitation to remember and reflect, wants to stimulate in us an awareness that our God loves us so deeply as to be involved in the human story through creative and redemptive love.

That involvement does not take place at the expense of human freedom. God's presence does not coerce, intimidate or bully. God's activity among us invites, inspires, encourages and guides.

God's presence among us is not a vengeful, punishing one. It is rather the expression of a loving and abiding care



**A** LONG THE WAY

for us for all the days of our lives, in every breath that we draw.

We're reminded of all of that through the course of our Advent readings. God's presence and activity among the people of Israel was not a guarantee that they would be carefree. It was a sign of fidelity that kept the promise alive even in the most painful of circumstances, even when the people were at their worst. Although the people were unfaithful to the covenant, God was never unfaithful to the covenant.

It is at the core of our Christian tradition that God's saving presence and activity among us became enfleshed in Jesus. Jesus shows us the face of God and expresses in his conduct all that God calls us and enables us to be. In his life, preeminently in his suffering and death,

he is full of kindness and great compassion. To whom did he ever speak an angry word? To those who wanted to replace love with power. To those who placed heavy burdens on the shoulders of others and did nothing to help them bear their heavy burdens.

Our call to remember, to ponder these realities during the Advent season, is not a church version of the nostalgia trend we have experienced in our country. Nor is it to distract us from the sometimes harsh realities of contemporary life.

Quite the contrary, it is meant to help us to look at life honestly and to face its demands lovingly. And it wants to tell us that both honesty and love are possible for us, and can even be joyful for us when we remember that the love of God is with us in it all. (I find it helpful to remember that almost every book of the Bible was composed in the context of some crisis!)

We don't have much time before Christmas and, surely, we are all busy. But, in the midst of our activity, I hope we can encourage one another to remember the living, active, saving reality of God's love among us.

For, finally, it is in celebration of that love, available to us in Jesus, that all of the activity is generated. And, when the activity is long forgotten, that love will still be alive among us, calling us to more life.

Peace to all.

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