



First Sunday of Advent reflection by Connecticut Chaplain
Fr. Ian Jeremiah, ChM

December in Malaysia. What is it like? Well, there is no snow. The first time I saw the white stuff drifting down from the sky was when I came here to the United States. What else in December in Malaysia is different? The only ice you find is in the refrigerator. As for the leaves, they are still on the trees and remain green. The temperature hovers around 32° C or 90° F. Humidity is right up there.

But I still looked forward to December. It was special. My mother would sew new clothes for us children. We would help her bake cakes but there were no electric mixers – just human ones: Me. But I enjoyed stirring the large wooden spoon around and around the huge mixing bowl to mix the sweet ingredients thoroughly. Why? Because I got to lick the spoon and bowl at the end. In December, I also remember that we cleaned the house, inside and out. We prepared for Christmas.

What does a painter do before he paints a wall? He scrapes, sands, washes, and applies a primer. December is a joyous time of preparation. The Church has a special name for it - Advent.

How do you wake up in the morning? Perhaps with an alarm clock or iPhone. Well, Advent is our alarm clock. It is our spiritual wake-up call. Why do we need to be spiritually awake? So that we can be attentive to God and others - to live in love.

Advent is a time of joyful expectation. What do we expect and why are we so joyful? The answer can be found in the readings for the first week of Advent. The prophet Isaiah voices the hope and longing of God's people, wandering far away from home, in exile in a foreign

land. They want to return home. They dream of the day when God's rule will prevail, and wars will end.

God's people long for a time when all hatred and prejudice will cease, and when streets will be safe.

How and when will this come about? We do not know. But Jesus said, "*Behold, the Kingdom Of God is among you (Luke 17:21).*" How can the kingdom be among us when the world is so full of sin and violence? To see God's kingdom, we need a special kind of light, the light of faith, the Light of Advent. Your church might have the Advent wreath with 4 candles, being lit ever increasingly as we go deeper into Advent, to symbolize the light of Christ coming into our world by his birth. Little by little, the light of Advent replaces the darkness of doubt and discouragement. By the light of faith, we see God's kingdom. St Paul reminds us: "*the night is almost over; it will be daylight soon (Romans 13:12).*" He urges us therefore to turn away from the darkness and to live in the light.

To recognize the darkness in our lives, takes courage. But it takes even more courage to do something about it. There is no true joy living in the darkness. But with the grace of Christ, we can free ourselves of the darkness. We can walk in the light. To walk in the light is to walk in the joy and freedom of Jesus Christ. The prophet Isaiah says to us: "*come, let us walk in the light of the Lord (Isaiah 2:5).*"

There is a story of a priest who asked the children: "*How can you tell when the night is passed, and the day is on its way back again? One child said, "When you see an animal in the distance, and you can tell whether it is a sheep or a goat."* Another said, "*When you see a tree in the distance, and you can tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree.*" Yet another said, "*When you see a person in the distance, and you can tell whether it is a friend or an enemy.*"

But the priest shook his head at the answers. So, the children pleaded: "*tell us what your answer is.*" He replied: "*it is when you can look at the face of any human being and see there the face of a brother or sister, because if you cannot do this, then no matter what time it is, for you it is still night.*"

Advent in Latin is *adventus* and it means "*coming.*" It is the time to prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus' birthday.

There is another story of a child, 5 years old. His mom was singing the song: *“Away in a manger, no crib for His bed. The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head. The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay. The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.”* The child exclaims: *“little baby Jesus did not have a crib and had to sleep on a pile of straw!”* He starts crying and says, *“It’s not fair. I have a nice warm bed to sleep in and baby Jesus had to go without one.”* So, the child goes to his mom's purse and pulls out her credit card and says, *“Let’s buy him one. Mom.”* But the mom says, *“Well we can’t buy Jesus Christ a crib... but, we can create a new family tradition: giving gifts to Jesus in the form of acts of love, sacrifice and prayer, noted on slips of paper and placing them in Jesus’ crib. To prepare the manger is to prepare a soft bedding for the Christ Child during Advent. Every night, we should put in the crib one straw for each act of sacrifice and prayer that we’ve performed out of love that day. So, on Christmas Day, baby Jesus will find an ample supply of soft straw to keep Him warm and to soften the hardness of the manger's boards. Then on Christmas Eve, when our house is darkened and while we process with lighted candles singing Silent Night, with you holding the baby Jesus, you get to place him in the softened manger.”*

For us, the crib or manger represents our hearts as we prepare for Christ. Advent is a wonderful opportunity for us to respond to the coming of Christ. It would be wonderful if at the end of the Advent, on December 24th, we can truthfully, say that with God’s help, we have left some form of darkness behind us - That we have allowed the light to shine into some area of our lives where before darkness reigned - That Jesus’ crib is filled with lots of soft straw. Then we would be more ready to meet the Lord because Jesus is the Lord of light, the Lord in whose presence no form of darkness can exist.

We are a people on whom the light of Christ has shone and still shines. We must, therefore, strive to walk in the light, the light of truth and life, the light of holiness and grace, the light of justice, love, and peace.

But darkness still has power over us. The darkness can take many forms. Any kind of hatred, enmity, lack of forgiveness, lack of reconciliation, injustice done to another, immoral behavior, drunkenness, addiction – all of these are forms of darkness. But the darkness cannot overcome the light of Christ that we can experience in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

As we clean up our houses for holiday guests, let us also clean up our hearts and our souls for the coming of Christ at Christmas.