

Sunday Advent 2 Year C

8th/9th December, 2018

There is a Time for Mourning and a Time for Rejoicing

In the first reading today, the prophet Baruch writes:

*Jerusalem, take off your dress of sorrow and distress,
put on the beauty of the glory of God for ever,
wrap the cloak of the integrity of God around you,*

The time for mourning is over and now is the time for rejoicing.

The tradition of wearing mourning clothes for a period after a loved one has died has largely disappeared in this country, but you will often see elderly widows in black mourning clothes in other countries where the tradition is stronger. In England, going into mourning became popular in the Victorian era largely influenced by Queen Victoria who was around forty when she lost her beloved Prince Albert. She stayed in the deepest black for the next forty years, until she died.

As with so many Victorian conventions, there was a fairly strict code for how long mourning should be worn by the classes of people who moved in the higher echelons of society. A widow would wear mourning for two years after her husband's death while her children could get away with just a year. The mourning period for the loss of grandparents was six months, for aunts and uncles, two months, for great aunts and uncles, six weeks and for first cousins just four weeks.

For the Victorians, in an age when open expression of feeling was considered a weakness, black mourning clothes were an acceptable way of demonstrating one's inner feelings to the outside world without embarrassment.

However, unless you were Queen Victoria, there would come a time to throw off the mourning, come out into society again and resume normal life. While you kept your treasured memories of your lost loved one, there came a time to stop looking back in sorrow and to start looking forward in hope, and for us, this is what the time of Advent is about.

Yes, of course, there are things in our past, in everyone's past, that we regret and perhaps the first half of Advent is given to us as a time to reflect on the past. There will be mistakes we've made, losses we've suffered, situations we wish might have turned out differently, actions we could have taken to make things better. It is good to look at these and reflect on them but only to learn from them, not to dwell on them in a morbid way, not to go into mourning over them.

But there comes a time to move on from reflecting on the past to planning for the future with optimism, for looking forward in hope to the good things to come. The second half of Advent encourages us in this because it reminds us that life constantly surprises us with new joys and happy events which make all our troubles seem small. By inviting us to celebrate one of the greatest joys in life, the arrival of a new baby and all the love, expectations and hopes we have when a new life comes into the world, Advent reminds us that hope springs eternal, *dum spiro spero*, as the Latin saying goes, ‘while I breathe, I hope’, as long as I live there is something to hope for.

When that baby, that new life that we look forward to welcoming is the Christ child, then our hope is magnified immeasurably. He is the Light of the World, the one whose life dispels the darkness of fear and the shadow of death, that pulls aside the mourning veil of loss and sorrow. Now ‘the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light’

The readings of this season remind us not to be defined by the mistakes of the past or to be oppressed by the troubles of the present, but to look forward, in hope, to a time of new promise, new possibilities, new birth, new life, new beginnings in Christ who comes to show us how to live, like Him, as children of God.