

Homily Sunday 3rd Dec 1st Sunday of Advent
An open mind opens us now to the coming of God into our lives.

I love this season better than Christmas, actually, because I like most of the Advent hymns, which we don't seem to sing very often because people don't know them, but I really love the Advent hymns and I love that feeling of expectancy and waiting for that great day. Advent's got that lovely sense of journey, unlike Lent which seems to go on forever. During the last few weeks loads of memories from ages ago have been coming back to me and they've been quite powerful, and I think they're experiences that register deep in our hearts and affect us and there was one that I was sharing with my first parish priest, Father Pat Henry, who died at the beginning of this century.

I'm sure I've got it right... He went to a school called Saint Nathy's, I think it was. It was a boarding school in Ireland and it was run by the Vincentians and we had a laugh because we both said that our teachers were thugs and I said my teachers were thugs at Saint Bede's in Bradford and it was just a nightmare. But I was asking him about his vocation once and it made me laugh because he said he thought he'd go and talk to one of the priests and he had to build up the courage. So, at 8 o'clock at night, he went to the dean of studies in this boarding school and knocked on the door.

The door opened just a little and the eyes looked out and said, "Yes, what do you want?" And he said, "I think I want to be a priest." He said, "See me tomorrow." [laughter] Now... And I said, "You still became one?" He said, "Yes,". And this reminds me of mine and other peoples' bad experiences. I listen to people sometimes who are lapsed, and they talk about their bad experiences of church or priests or teachers and how it put them off religion and I've thought long about this, and relived some memories of my own bad experiences. And it brings me back to Advent, always brings me back to Advent - HOPE.

This sense of staying awake because I think staying awake is not just about something in the future, the end of the world or the end of my life, when the Master comes. That's often how it's been preached, hasn't it, that God might take your life midnight, cock crow dawn. You don't know when, so you'd better be alert, but I actually think it's about living life now. It's about taking stock, preparing the way of the Lord because if you think of all those prophets and people who... like we'd listen to one tonight... who paved the way for the advent of God to His people, then it makes us ask, "How do I pave the way for the advent of God in my life? The bitter experiences... Has it made me prejudiced? Has it made me bitter against certain things?"

And Advent, the staying awake element, is about searching for those elements, even the bad experiences, that have coloured your eyes and closed you to certain things. Where do I need to unravel those bad things that have affected my approaching the mystery of God? So, I mean Father Pat Henry, obviously, persevered and even those bad experiences can build character. We say baptism gives character. We say when we're baptised, a character is imprinted on our soul, the mark of God. Well, the bad experiences, if we shed them and reform them and resuscitate the good in us, those too build character.

The irony is it's the negative things in life, depending on how we respond, that build character or destroy it. If we rise above the negative and work it through, we find character. It shapes and moulds us. Even the bad things that we've experienced or done, if we rise above them and move forward, we'd actually complying with Advent. We're straightening our paths, the winding ways. We're getting rid of the prejudices and looking at the things that make us react, and everybody in this church reacts to certain things that brings back memories and you've got to ask yourself, not just about the good things, like the good teachers and the good priests and I can think of them now

when I'm calling to mind. But when you talk to other people, it's all about the bad things too, isn't it?

The things that come to mind, are sometimes all the bad things. You can remember the bad priest better than the good ones sometimes. So, it's about bringing all that experience, not seeing the bad things as irrelevant, but as that which can shape character and make you stronger. So, when the Lord says, "Stay awake because you do not know what time the master is coming, and he's left his servants in charge." And we are those... We are the masters, to some degree of our own destiny. We are the servants left in charge of our own house. And it's how we respond to grace, in the grace of this season that effects how we approach the mystery of God. So, if we're bitter and still caught up in some awful experience of our past or something, how can we approach Christmas with a mind open mind to the mystery of God coming to us?