

The First Sunday of Advent November 29, 2020

In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah offers us one of the Bible's most beautiful images of God. It is the image of God as the potter, one who makes things out of clay. We, His people, are the clay. Like an artist, God is hard at work molding and shaping us. He is not some distant, impersonal force watching over the world the way a little child might look at an ant farm or fish tank. No. God is involved in our lives, getting His hands dirty, showing us the way we should go, and smoothing out the road ahead of us.

The question we might naturally ask is, "If God is so active in the world, why is it such a mess?" Isaiah himself asks this question himself when he writes, "Why do you let us wander, O Lord, from your ways and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?" It is a question that people have been asking since the beginning of time.

One simple answer is that God is not done with the world yet. Before the potter gets his hands on it, clay is just a lump of wet mud. The potter has to place it on the spinning wheel and then form it gently but firmly into whatever shape is pleasing to him. Then, the clay must be baked in a kiln, and once it is removed, the paint can be applied. It is a long process to go from a lump of clay to a beautiful vase. And, it is a long process to lead humanity out of its selfishness and cruelty into the love and wisdom of God.

If there's one thing that is true about God it is that He is in no hurry. God takes the time He needs to get things right. He has all the time in the world! He took millions of years to form the universe and eventually to form the earth. He took millions more years to make the earth sustainable for life and suitable for humans. Then, He took many centuries to form the people of Israel in the ways of His goodness and truth. Over the course of several more centuries, He taught them to hope for a Messiah. Then, in the fullness of time, Jesus was born to save us from our sins. Now, God is preparing the world for the time when Jesus will come again to create a new heaven and a new earth.

We don't know how long it will be until the world comes to an end. But, it will come to an end. And, when it does, Christ will be revealed as the King of Creation, and those who have believed in him will reign with him in glory. As St Paul tells us in today's second reading, "He will keep you firm to the end, irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." God's masterpiece - the redeemed human race gathered into His Church - which He fashioned patiently with His own hands, will then be complete.

If we are not where we think we should be in our lives and in our relationship with God, then we need to be patient. God is not done with us yet. He is making something of us that is even more beautiful than we could ever imagine. But it takes time and

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sometimes even a little pain. But our Heavenly Father will not fail us. If we but trust in His love and in the brilliance of His work in us.

There's another reason why the world can be such a mess. Very simply, we don't give God permission to work on us. We keep trying to get in the way of God's plan. Clay does not have a mind of its own. It cannot jump out of the potter's hand or out of the kiln. But, human beings are always running away from God. We'd rather stay a wet lump of cold mud than be transformed into something beautiful by him. Even believers very often find it difficult to trust God enough to let Him take control of their lives. It is a basic human tendency to believe that we know better than God what's good for us and how we should live.

But, God never gives up on us. Like an artist consumed with his work, God is intent on making each of us into the man or woman he dreams we can be. He doesn't see a cold, hard lump of clay when he looks at any of us. God sees something beautiful made in his own image. No matter how we may have tarnished our beauty through sin, God never fails to see the good he has placed within us. And, God will never stop working to bring that good out of us.

The early Fathers of the Church had a beautiful way of describing how God works in the world. They described Jesus and the Holy Spirit as the two hands God the Father uses to shape us. Jesus reveals the truth of the Father's love while the Holy Spirit works within our hearts to inspire us to do good. All this takes place within the course of our lives. When things are going well, the Son and the Spirit work together to make us grateful and generous. In bad times when we are suffering or struggling, the Son and the Spirit teach us to place our trust in God and to allow him to carry us through it. Therefore, whatever situation we may be facing, God is with us, using the ordinary circumstances of our lives to help us to grow in holiness. With the Son and the Spirit, the Father shapes and molds us into something beautiful.

Today, we begin the season of Advent - four weeks of preparation for the birth of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We wear purple during this time as we do during Lent because it is a season of penance. We are to spend these weeks searching our hearts for the ways in which we fail to let God work in our lives. We are to invite God back, asking him to take us into his hands and mold us into the image of his Son, Jesus Christ. The gospel warns us to be on the lookout for the God who approaches us with tenderness and mercy. May he find us ready to welcome him and ready to abandon our lives into his firm yet gentle hands.