



**Most Rev Anthony Fisher OP, Bishop of Parramatta
2012 Advent Pastoral Letter, 2 December 2012**

The secular year winds inexorably to its close, with longer and hotter days, endless Christmas parties, shopping and preparations and the rest. It's the big slow-down towards the summer ... yet suddenly the Church's new year begins!

Just when we're ready to wind down and take it easy, have a few drinks at the office parties, switch the mobile phone on to silent and take a snooze – at that very moment the Church's liturgy says: 'Wake up! Be on your guard! You do not know the hour.'

This can come as a bit of a slap in the face. Why is Advent like that?

Well, one thing Advent teaches us is that God's time is not man's time. God exists in and as eternity, which means that there is no time really for Him or that all time is at once for Him, which is pretty mind-boggling for us. Advent suggests that we Christians, too, have to look beyond the here and now, the busyness and the leisure. Our personal diaries and our world's calendars are not what ultimately matter.

The early Christians lived in daily expectation of Jesus' return. We may smile fondly at their over-literal interpretation of Jesus' words that they would be reunited soon, but maybe they were on to something.

We moderns tend to imagine the second coming as some infinitely distant event with little to do with us but, in fact, just like the 1st Century Christians, we live in a 'middle ages' – the space between Jesus' resurrection and return – and the last judgement will not be arranged to fit neatly into our current work or holiday plans.

So Advent begins with 'Stir Up Sunday' which takes its name from the old Advent collect, but also from the practice of housewives stirring up Christmas pudding for the last time before the big day.

It reminded people to stir themselves up, to be wary of complacency, not to slow down spiritually as the heat in Australia builds up, not to suspend the practice of their faith as the silly season begins.

We should keep our eyes on the new Jerusalem, for our long pilgrimage is almost over: the Lord's unending day is dawning.

Perhaps this Advent message makes Christians sound like kill-joys to the rest of the world each December. Why should we be tense when everyone else is trying to release the tension? Shouldn't we be grateful we've made it safely (and perhaps successfully) through another year and are about to have a well-deserved break? Haven't we earned a bit of a Christmas bonus, a bit of a break from God's demands?

Isn't Christmas supposed to be party time and if we start a bit early with office parties and finish a bit late with beach holidays, doesn't that mean we are just stretching Christmas over two months, taking it more seriously as it were?

No, the Advent wisdom seems to be: we will not hear that Christmas message of joy and hope without appropriate preparation. Without a good Advent, Christmas will be reduced to hang-overs in paper crowns and indigestion wrapped in tinsel.

The great theologian St Anselm once asked 'Why did God become man at Christmas?' and he answered for the whole Church: 'To redeem us; to save us from our sins.'

The Christmas message tells the whole world: we cannot go on just as before: everything changes because this divine babe is on His way. Christmas will offer us a new beginning and we can only grasp it if we convert now, if we stir ourselves up out of our slumber and smugness.

If we are spiritually asleep when the Christmas babe comes, He might just find there is no room at the inn of our homes, our lives, our hearts; they are locked and the householders asleep.

Don't get me wrong: I'm all for prawns and champagne and Christmas puddings or whatever is your family's equivalent. But if that (and indigestion and mounting credit-card debt) is all this season means for us, there's not much sign that Christ's first Advent changed anything. How *do* we stir ourselves up so that the pudding makers experience an expectancy like Mary did, and so we can prepare ourselves for Jesus' coming like the prophets did?

Advent is New Year's Day for Catholics. A time, then, for resolutions. Not like the ones people make and break at the new calendar year, but the kind that come from an honest self-examination, calling ourselves to account, allowing the bright light of the Christmas star to spotlight the darker sides of our lives so we can spring clean them away for the summer ahead.

Advent says loud and clear: live NOW as if Christ will return at any moment with all the saints, all our loved ones. Show them an Advent we can be proud of!

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<http://www.parra.catholic.org.au/bishop-of-parramatta/most-rev-anthony-fisher-op/the-bishop-s-messages.aspx>