

Daybreak, gentlemen!

When my sons were children we always set up an Advent Calendar in the living room prior to Christmas. Advent Calendars originated in Germany long ago. It was a pasteboard thing with imagery of old time houses with windows. And behind every closed window there was some hidden item out of the Christmas story, a shepherd, a star, the Magi, a manger, and by December 24th an infant in a manger. The whole of the Christmas event, initially hidden behind each numerical window of December, opened up to guide us to the birth of Christ.

Quaint though the Calendar might be, it carries a weighty message. It says that each day (not just of Advent) of our lives is not just 24 hours of clock time but signals the arrival each day of *real* time. Advent means “arrival” and what arrives each day, each month, each year of our lives is time not as just a date but as a potential *event*. It can arrive as an insight, a change of view, something you hadn’t thought of before, an event that shakes you up or often *suddenly* deepens your understanding of who you are, what life is really about. Haven’t there been such moments in your life – so that you are not exactly the person you were before? Time is always a visit of the Holy Spirit bringing you a gift, a wake-up call, snapping you out of your distracted existence. Something to be alert to – as Jesus says in today’s Gospel: *Watch!*

Jimmy Doyle was exposed to such an experience in James Joyce’s short story “After the Race” – part of his slim volume *Dubliners* written in 1905 when automobiles were the novelty. Jimmy was a fortunate (?) Irish youth in that he was the son of a once downtrodden Irish father who became rich in the meat business throughout Dublin, having even contracts with the police (whose job in those days included controlling Irish rebels). To get rich the father, who was once an advocate of Irish independence, lost interest in that for the sake of wealth and a comfortable life. He cozied up to the English who governed the country, made sure his son associated with elite friends, studied at Cambridge. In other words he gave up his identification with his oppressed people, chose material upward mobility, the approval of high society.

And so as the story begins we find Jimmy sharing a racing car with its affluent French owner, Canadian assistant and a less well off foreign pianist. They win the race (even as Jimmy’s father has striven to win what’s been called the rat race of modern survival). They dine well at an expensive restaurant, discourse on silly things, laugh a lot and finally betake themselves to an American’s yacht in the harbor. There follows a whole night of cards (with a condescending Englishman present) in which Jimmy sensed he was not an equal, that his money was what they wanted, not him and his ethnicity. His IOU’s grew and drink left him too fuzzy to calculate his losses. In any case, these chaps who were at home with money fleeced him. At which point the pianist, who had stepped out on deck for some air, reentered the cabin and, *standing in a shaft of grey light*, said: *Daybreak, gentlemen*. There the story ends!

Did the fellow simply mean sunrise? That’s not what Joyce meant. Joyce meant that by now it should be *dawning* on Jimmy Doyle that the way of life his father chose and the social life to which he was educated was empty, that it could cost him his integrity, his authenticity - that it was time for him to retrieve his roots, a depth of mind, the recovery of whatever grace lingered in his heritage. This season of Advent offers such a wake-up call to each of us.