Advent 1A

Today, as you know, the Church enters into the season of Advent. We have lit our first candle, anticipating the gift that was given to us that first Christmas and is renewed each passing year – the gift of Christ our Emmanuel, God with us.

The first Sunday of Advent is also the beginning of a new liturgical year. What is a year? Simply put, it's a natural cycle. If we think back to our equations from high school maths, we will remember that time is convertible into distance over speed. A year is nothing other than the unit of Earth's motion around the Sun.

Years come and go. The sun keeps shining. The planet keeps circling round it. This regular motion in the heavens gives shape to our life on earth. Perhaps less now than in time past, when human activity was structured according to the rhythms of the natural world, which in turn are dependent on the sun. These days, our lives are governed more by the tyranny of the clock than the course of the planets. But the underlying reality remains. We still measure our lives in years. Our solar system is still the original clock.

In the Gospel, Jesus talks about the natural rhythm of life. Human life is, in its way, just as regular and predictable as Earth's orbit round the sun. "People were eating and drinking, taking husbands and wives" – they were doing the things they have always done, until – he adds – "the Flood came and swept all away". So, here's where it gets interesting. Here's where the cyclical and predictable pattern of our life gets interrupted.

"It will be as it was in the days of Noah", Jesus explains. Noah is an interesting figure here. We all know the story of what Noah put into the ark. "The animals went in two by two." Noah, plus his family, plus the animals. The ark, we could say, was the vehicle of a second creation. A new creation. What was wrong with the first one, you might ask? Well, the Biblical answer is pretty simple. Sin. The first creation had been thoroughly corrupted by sin. So, God decided a new creation was in order. 'More of the same' wasn't going to cut it. The cycle had to be interrupted.

There's a very ancient tradition that associates Noah's ark with the Cross of Christ, the timber that saved the world – or rather, brought forth a new world from the remnants of the old. It's only through the Cross of Christ that the cycle of the old creation – the cycle of sin and death – gets definitively interrupted. When Noah exited the Ark with his family and the animals, what had really changed? Had the old creation been swept away by the Flood? Not really. It's only with the death and resurrection of the Lord that a genuinely new creation, a world refashioned in God's image, comes to birth.

The liturgical year is the cycle, not of the old creation, but of the new. In a planetary year, we are held in the sun's orbit by the force of gravity. In a liturgical year, we are held in the orbit of the Paschal Mystery by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church's year can't be reduced to a mere natural cycle. It can't be adequately described in terms of the old equation *time = distance over speed*. Our yearly cycle of worship is not simply a unit of time. It is the constant bringing of time into contact with eternity.

If that all sounds a bit highfalutin, we can simply bring it back to the Mass. The Eucharist has often been described as the "source and summit" of the Church's life. I'm suggesting we can also think about it as the gravitational centre of the Church's life, expressed as a yearly cycle of worship. The Mass is to the New Creation what the Sun is to the Old. The Mass *is* the Paschal Mystery of Christ: it is our source of life, our source of light, that around which everything turns, that upon which everything depends. Gathered around the altar at the start of this new liturgical year, we bear witness, by our very presence, to the ever-present reality of God's new creation.