

Dear Friends,

Today at Mass we heard these words from the Opening Prayer, *“God of power and mercy, open our hearts in welcome. Remove the things that hinder us from receiving Christ with joy, so that we may share his wisdom and become one with him when he comes in glory, for he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.”* This is a marvelous prayer for us, not only for the Second Sunday of Advent, but for every day of our lives.

What are the things that hinder us from receiving Christ with joy? This is a personal question for each of us to ponder in a prayerful way this week. One thing that would make it easier for us to welcome Christ with joy is to have our God open our hearts in welcome.

People who have welcoming hearts have a great capacity for joyfully welcoming Christ. They are hospitable, gracious and warm. People want to be with those who are welcoming. A welcoming heart has a sort of gravitational pull that attracts people.

Do we as a parish have a welcoming heart? I believe we do, but there is room for growth. Our worship should have a gravitational allure for people who feel, for whatever reasons, that they are not welcome to be part of our community. Many people use that as an excuse. Many others have really been hurt by leaders of the Church.

This prayer is important for us because there are things that hinder us from receiving Christ with joy, even in the ways we worship. People feel self-conscious about singing out loud. Does this not hinder us from receiving Christ with joy? A lot of times people like to be exclusive about where they sit and will not make any effort to get to know other people in the community. Does this not hinder us from receiving Christ with joy? If we refuse to be generous in charity and the ways in which we are present to others in this community, it is virtually impossible to welcome Christ with joy because Christ is in the community. Christ dwells in the poor. If we refuse to recognize his presence in each other, how can we welcome him with joy?

I offer this note as a form of personal reflection, knowing that I have a lot of growing to do. I am still learning how to welcome Christ, and the greatest challenge I have is in joyfully welcoming his presence in my own life. If I can't welcome Christ in prayer, if I am not joyfully welcoming him in every moment, how can I be open to receiving him in others?

Advent is a challenging and exciting season because its entire focus is on welcoming Christ into our lives. Perhaps it would be a good thing for us to bring this opening prayer from the Mass today into our daily prayer this week. Let's prayerfully ponder how we can joyfully welcome Christ into our hearts in the many ways we are to love one another – and ourselves.

In joyful hope,
Fr. Tim Seigel