

1st Sunday in Advent - C

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

There is evidence from the mid-fourth century on concerning some period of preparation for the Christmas-Epiphany celebration. Length and emphasis varied from place to place. Some regions kept a relatively long Advent (from St. Martin's feast - November 11); others, a rather brief one. In Rome the season evolved to a four-week preparation whose focus was on the joyful celebration of the Lord's Incarnation. In Gaul there was a longer, heavily penitential season emphasizing the Lord's glorious advent at the end of time as Lord of history and judge of the universe. Roman practice from the 12th century, codified by the Council of Trent and enhanced by the greatly enriched lectionary of Vatican Council II, combines these different emphases. The violet vestments (with rose as an option on the 3rd Sunday) and the preaching of John the Baptist bespeak the penitential aspect which invites the people to reform. The Gloria is omitted, as during Lent, but for a somewhat different reason, as the official commentary on the revised Calendar notes: "So that on Christmas night the song of the angels may ring out anew in all its freshness." On the other hand, there is a clear note of joyful expectation: The Alleluia is retained before the Gospel. There has been no mandatory Advent fast since the 1917 Code of Canon Law. The Ambrosian Rite in use throughout the area around Milan, Italy still observes a longer (6-week) Advent while the Eastern Rites in general observe a shorter "pre-feast" period before Christmas.

Advent is a time for looking both backward and forward. We look backward as we prepare to celebrate the historical birth of Jesus of Nazareth at Christmas. Before that birth people longed for the Messiah who would restore Israel to her former power. We identify with that ancient longing for restoration as we await Christ's coming more fully into our lives and also as we await His 2nd coming.

With that longing for restoration in mind, we recognize in Advent a time of preparation and anticipation. What we celebrate as having happened in the past points to what we anticipate is coming again. First, we recognize that Christ is born into our lives each day as we open ourselves to His grace and love. These moments of discovering birth in Christ are times when we can stand with the shepherds and hear glad tidings proclaimed. Advent is a season that prepares us to discover new birth happening over and over again for us in and thru Christ. We celebrate those birth times at Christmas. Second, we look forward in Advent to the culmination of Christ's kingdom, when He will return in glory to fulfill the promise of wholeness as all creation responds to His healing presence. In our acclamation during the Eucharistic Prayer, we identify with this longing when we say "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again," or similar words in the other acclamations. Through the Holy Spirit, this new age has already begun, and this too we celebrate.

1st Reading - Jeremiah 33:14-16

On the "Day of the Lord" Israel will be restored after a time of suffering. The writer uses

beautiful language to remind us that Jesus is a descendent of King David, who was a son of Jesse.

¹⁴ The days are coming, says the LORD,

This is most likely just a way of calling attention to a very solemn proclamation as opposed to pointing to a specific time.

when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and Judah.

Verses 15 & 16 reuse the Prophet's oracle on the future king in Jeremiah 23:5-6; Jerusalem replaces Israel and is called by this king's new name. In 23:6 both Judah and Israel share in the messianic salvation.

¹⁵ In those days, in that time, I will raise up for David a just shoot; he shall do what is right and just in the land. ¹⁶ In those days Judah shall be safe and Jerusalem shall dwell secure; this is what they shall call her: "The LORD our justice."

"The LORD our justice" is a word-play on the current king's name (Zedekiah means "my justice is Yahweh" vs. "Yahweh is our justice"). Isaiah had already given a similar name to this future king – Emmanuel (God is with us) (Isaiah 7:14).

2nd Reading - 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2

Keeping with the advent theme of anticipation, our second reading urges us to perfect ourselves even more in preparation for our meeting Jesus when our end time has come.

^{3:12} [M]ay the Lord

This prayer is addressed to Christ as the Risen Lord. The preceding verse "Now may God himself, our Father, and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you" is addressed to the Father and to the Lord Jesus as if they act as one. This is the first inklings of the Trinity.

make you increase and abound

A superabundance.

in love for one another and for all,

The whole community and beyond.

just as we have for you,

The apostles serve as the example.

¹³ so as to strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the

coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones. (Amen.)

This petition focuses upon being prepared for the end times, the parousia (presence) of Jesus as Lord. Our hearts are to be strengthened because blamelessness and holiness are the qualities of fully realized existence in the end times. Zechariah also wrote of the end times (see Zechariah 14:5).

“This is a proof of superabundant love, that he not only prays for them by himself but even inserts his prayer in his epistles. Paul’s prayers demonstrate a fervent soul unable to restrain his love. The mention of his prayers also proves that Paul and Silvanus’ failure to visit them was not voluntary nor the result of indolence. It is as though Paul said: May God Himself shorten the trials that constantly distract us, so that we may come directly to you. “May the Lord make you to increase and abound.” Do you see the unrestrained madness of love that is shown by these words? [Saint John Chrysostom (A. D. 398-404), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Thessalonians*, 4]

4:1 Finally, brothers [and sisters],

A transitional expression linking the prayers and the teaching.

we earnestly ask and exhort you

Diplomatic language which implies Paul’s authority.

in the Lord Jesus

The source of his authority.

that, as you received from us

Paul recalls his earlier instruction (see 1 Thessalonians 2:13 for a similar reference to this earlier teaching). Remember that Paul writes to congregations which he has established and now oversees (the title of bishop means “overseer”).

how you should conduct yourselves

He is addressing behavior.

to please God

Behavior with obedience to God as its aim. Saint Paul is a pastor – he commends and encourages.

– and as you are conducting yourselves – you do so even more. ² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

Again he refers to the earlier instructions. What is to be done is known, it’s just a matter of putting it into practice on a continual basis.

“There is only one calamity for a Christian, this being disobedience to God. All the other things, such as loss of property, exile, peril of life, Paul does not even consider a grievance at all. And that which all dread, departure from this life to the other world – this is to him sweeter than life itself. For as when one has climbed to the top of a cliff and gazes on the sea and those who are sailing upon it, he sees some being washed by the waves, others running upon hidden rocks, some hurrying in one direction, others being driven in another, like prisoners, by the force of the gale. Many are actually in the water, some of them using their hands only in the place of a boat and a rudder, and many drifting along upon a single plank or some fragment of the vessel, others floating dead. He witnesses a scene of manifold and various disasters. Even so he who is engaged in the service of Christ draws himself out of the turmoil and stormy billows of life and takes his seat upon secure and lofty ground. For what position can be loftier or more secure than that in which a man has only one anxiety, ‘How he ought to please God’? Have you seen the shipwrecks, Theodore, of those who sail upon this sea?” [Saint John Chrysostom (A. D. 371-378), *To The Fallen Theodore*, 2,4]

Gospel - Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

The season of Advent is launched in Cycle C with the apocalyptic writings of Saint Luke. These are times of expectant waiting. We must not grow tired or complacent but be ready and alert; able to read the signs of the times. Everything that happens, including suffering and trauma, has significance in understanding God’s presence and activity in creation.

As usual in apocalyptic writings, we deal here with the language of poetic truth, not literal truth. Hence it is futile to tie symbols to actual historical events in attempting to predict, for example, the exact date of Christ’s second coming.

If this reading sounds familiar, it should, as we heard the parallel text from Mark two weeks ago (33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B). The time is just prior to Holy Thursday and Jesus is giving His final teachings to His apostles before His passion begins.

[Jesus said to His disciples:] ²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves.

The signs are not to be taken literally, but as an indication that all creation will announce the second coming. The whole universe will tremble at the Lord’s coming in power and glory (see Daniel 7:13-14).

²⁶ People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads

In contrast with all those who will be cowering in fear.

because your redemption is at hand.”

Because we are followers of Christ, we have confidence and hope and should not be fearful.

³⁴ **“Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise ³⁵ like a trap. For that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth. ³⁶ Be vigilant at all times and pray**

Constant prayer is a persistent theme throughout Luke. Vigilance consists in making a constant effort which keeps us close to God.

that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man.”

If we have lived as we should, the day we die will be a day of joy and not of terror. In meeting Christ we will not be meeting a judge who will find us guilty, but instead, He will embrace us and lead us into the house of His Father to remain there forever. Do I have assurance of my salvation? No, but I have absolute assurance that God will be true to His word and His word tells me that if I live the life He wants me to live, when my end time comes, I will be with Him in heaven. I also know that if I do what I want rather than what He wants, and do not reconcile myself with Him, I will not receive my inheritance.