

1st Sunday of Advent – Cycle B

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-4th 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 Second 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.

During the first period of Advent, the readings from the prophet Isaiah continually speak of God's visitation, consolation and redemption of His people, while the corresponding Gospel selections portray Christ as the fulfillment of the prophetic promises.

1st Reading - Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7

This portion of Isaiah points toward the victory of Yahweh in a new heaven and new earth, to be reflected in a new Temple and new priesthood. The Jews did not suffer physically in Babylon, they were treated quite well. During their exile the Jews even lost their ability to speak Hebrew and instead adopted Persian Aramaic as their language. After the Jewish people returned from exile in Babylon, their nation and even their Temple continued to lie desolate. Surely the punishment of the people had gone on long enough. When would God come to restore the fortunes of His chosen people? This passage is a plaintive lament and cry for God to reveal His power and presence among the people and to intervene in the course of human events.

16^b You, LORD, are our father, our redeemer you are named forever.

The sacred writer is defending his status as an authentic Israelite and true child of God (Exodus 4:22). God became Israel's father not by creating the people but by redeeming them. Redemption imparted a life that shared God's love and hopes, a life far more precious than any physical life.

17 Why do you let us wander, O LORD, from your ways, and harden our hearts so that we fear you not? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage.

Servants are faithful disciples.

19^b Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you, ^{64:2} [w]hile you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for, ³ such as they had not heard of from of old.

The sacred writer is imploring God's personal intervention and is pleading for a theophany more wondrous than Sinai.

No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you doing such deeds for those who wait for him. ⁴ Would that you might meet us doing right, that we were mindful of you in our ways! Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful;

God has abandoned Israel to their guilt.

⁵ all of us have become like unclean men, all our good deeds are like polluted rags;

Implies a cultural shame and ceremonial uncleanness

We have all withered like leaves, and our guilt carries us away like the wind. ⁶ There is none who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to cling to you; For you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us up to our guilt. ⁷ Yet, O LORD, you are our father; we are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands.

A desperate appeal

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

The busy port of Corinth had a lively and turbulent Christian community. Their first surviving letter from Saint Paul treats difficulties in the community reported to St. Paul (probably at Ephesus in A.D. 57) by their envoys, then answers various questions they brought to him. Today we hear the Greeting and Thanksgiving portion of Saint Paul's opening remarks.

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus,

This is Saint Paul's customary salutation. It signifies the gracious goodness of God and the gifts that are the effect of the divine liberality. Grace is the favor God shows and the gift He gives to men whom He saves in Christ. Peace is the fruit of the salvation God gives in Christ. It includes the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God as well as harmony among men. Perfect peace will be realized only at the parousia, when Christ's redemptive work is completed. The Corinthians enjoy grace and peace because they are brothers of Jesus the Christ, children of His Father.

⁵ that in him you were enriched in every way, with all discourse and all knowledge,

All the charismatic gifts of speech: discourse of wisdom, discourse of knowledge (1 Corinthians 12:8) as well as the gift of tongues, of interpretation, of teaching, of making known a revelation, even of singing a psalm (1 Corinthians 14:26).

⁶ as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you, ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift

The Corinthians are adequately equipped with spiritual gifts. The Corinthians tended to focus on the excitement of the present, so Saint Paul has to remind them that completeness is reserved to the future.

as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The parousia of Christ

“Although we lack no gift, nevertheless we await the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will then keep us secure in all things and present us unimpeachable when the day of our Lord Jesus Christ comes. The end of the world shall arrive, when no flesh may glory in His sight.” [Saint Jerome (A.D. 415), *Dialogue Against the Pelagians* 2,8]

⁸ He will keep you firm to the end, irreproachable

If believers are to receive a favorable eschatological judgment, it is due to God’s assistance.

on the day of our Lord Jesus (Christ).

The Christian adaptation of the Day of Yahweh (Amos 5:18).

“Paul is confident that the Corinthians will persevere in righteousness during the day of judgment. People who could not be shaken in spite of so many turmoils and disagreements proved that they would remain faithful to the end. In praising them, Paul is also challenging those who had been corrupted by the errors of the false apostles, for in proclaiming the faith of the former, he is calling the latter to repentance.” [The Ambrosiaster (ca. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*, 1 Corinthians 1,4]

⁹ God is faithful,

God will not abandon what He has begun.

and by him you were called

Members of the Church are frequently referred to as “the called ones” (1 Corinthians 2:2, 24; Romans 1:6, 7; 8:28).

to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Communion. The Greek word translated here is *koinonia* which means the vital union of believers among themselves, their union with Christ. Their shared existence as members of His body. This *koinonia* is highlighted in the Eucharist (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

Gospel - Mark 13:33-37

Mark’s gospel is the most compact of all the gospels, concentrating not on Jesus’ teaching but on the mystery of His person, the gradual way in which the disciples reach an understanding of Him which still remains hidden from the crowds. The paradox is that Jesus is acknowledged as Son of God by the Father and by evil spirits, and yet He is rejected by the leaders of the Jews and is even misunderstood by His own disciples.

As we celebrate a new liturgical year, we look forward to the arrival of our Lord. As we await the Lord's coming, He warns us to always be on the alert.

³³ Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come.

This exhortation to Christian vigilance is true for all ages. Jesus brings this point out with a parable.

"A person does not go wrong when he knows that he does not know something, but only when he thinks he knows something which he does not know." [Saint Augustine of Hippo (ca. A.D. 400), *Letter to Hesychius* 52]

³⁴ It is like a man traveling abroad.

This parable compares watchfulness with regard to the kingdom to the watchfulness required of a doorkeeper when the master has gone on a journey: you do not know when the master of the house will come. Since the exact time is not known, constant vigilance is required.

He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵ Watch, therefore; you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning.

Four divisions of the night (into periods of three hours each) were used by the Romans. Jewish Palestinian usage divided it into three watches (as illustrated by the parallel story in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 12:38).

³⁶ May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'"

This statement lifts the whole discourse beyond the limits of the narrow perspective of the crisis that the coming destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple would mean to the Jews and Jewish Christians.

"Watch therefore, and pray, that you do not sleep unto death (see Luke 21:36). For your former good deeds will not profit you if in the end of your life you go astray from the true faith." [(ca. A.D.400), *Apostolic Constitutions*, 7,2,31]