

Advent Sunday 2014

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In today's Epistle for this first day of the new liturgical year, Saint Paul tells us, "it is now the hour for us to rise from sleep: for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed" (Rom 13:11); and in the Gospel, Our Lord tells us even more emphatically, "look up, and lift up your heads, because your redemption is at hand" (Lk 21:28). The "fullness of time" has arrived (Gal 4:4) and we must be ready.

The whole character of Advent is could be summed up as *holy impatience*. *Veni Domine et noli tardare*, "Come, O Lord, and delay not!" Countless times in the weeks ahead the prayers and liturgical texts will repeat this idea, especially as Christmas approaches. The word we find most often in these weeks is *Veni*, "come!"

Advent, as you know, is a word that means "coming." During this time of preparation for Christmas, the liturgy invites us to reflect on the threefold coming of Christ: his coming in the flesh at Christmas, his coming into our souls by grace, and his coming in glory at the end of time to judge all things. The sacred liturgy – like the Scriptures brings to our mind three things: some past event, some present grace and some promise of future glory. Advent brings this triple reality before our eyes in a very striking fashion.

First of all, Advent reminds us of a past event: namely, the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. For thousands of years, the patriarchs of the Old Covenant longed for the coming of the Messiah, who had been promised at the very dawn of human history. We are no longer in the same position as our ancient Fathers in the faith: they believe in the Messiah who was to come; we believe in the Messiah who has already come. That is why, even though the Advent liturgy is penitential in character, as we see from the violet vestments, the Church still sings the *Alleluia* on the Sundays of the season. In reliving the expectation of the Old Testament, we already have its accomplishment before her eyes. This is the reason for our confidence.

The whole long series of Old Testament prophecies remind us that the coming of Jesus Christ is the central point of human history, the only fact which gives it its full meaning. Jacob on his deathbed foretold that the Messiah would come just as the Jewish nation lost its independence to Rome; Haggai said he would come when the Second Temple, destroyed in the year 70, was still standing; 600 years before the time of Christ, the prophet Daniel announced the time of his coming, down to the very year, which works out to "the fifteenth year of

the reign of Tiberius Caesar,” as we will hear in the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Advent; the prophet Micah foretold his birth in Bethlehem, and so on. Nowhere in the history of religious anthropology will you find a Buddha, a Mohammed or a Joseph Smith foretold and announced centuries before his coming. So as we celebrate Christmas, and rejoice with the patriarchs whose prophecies have now been accomplished, our faith finds a strong confirmation. We do not celebrate an empty fable.

In Advent, this past becomes our present. The Gospel today insists particularly on the final coming of Christ, his coming in glory as universal Judge at the end of time. This future coming of Christ, which will happen at a moment when no one knows, gives meaning to our whole celebration of Advent. We can join our voices and prayers to those of the patriarchs and prophets because, even though from our standpoint Christ has already come, yet his second coming is still in the future. So we, like they, cry out for the coming of the Messiah. But Advent turns our waiting into hope, because our hope is based on a certainty. Saint Bernard explains very well, “In the first coming he comes in the flesh and in weakness; in the second, he comes in spirit and in power; in the third, he comes in glory and in majesty; and the second coming is the means whereby we pass from the first to the third”(Fifth Sermon for Advent). If we wish to be among the saints at the time of the last and glorious coming, we need to open our hearts to Christ now in his second coming, the coming of grace. We must not be like the people of Bethlehem who found no room in their houses at the time of the first coming.

The great Benedictine liturgist Dom Gueranger remarks, “In vain would the Son of God have come, nineteen hundred years ago, to visit and save mankind, unless He came again for each one of us and at every moment of our lives” (*The Liturgical Year*, “Advent – The Mystery of Advent”). If we want to make good use of Advent to receive Christ as he comes to us in grace, what can we do?

In setting up our spiritual programme for Advent, we must bear two points in mind: our resolutions must be concrete and practical. There is no use in telling ourselves some vague platitude, like, “This Advent I am going to try to be a nicer person.” At the same time, our resolutions cannot be so ambitious that they are incompatible with our health, work or family obligations: we will not be able to keep our resolutions and we will end up being discouraged and giving them up. So, now on this first day of Advent, let us make *one* concrete, feasible decision about what to do to prepare ourselves for Christmas, by improving our prayer life, by mortifying ourselves and by practicing greater charity to those around us.

I am sure that we all acknowledge that we have some progress to make in our prayer life. At the very least we should be sure to make a good confession

before Christmas, clearing out our soul to ready it for the arrival of the Christ Child, much as the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph did their best to clean out the cave in Bethlehem in preparation for the birth of Jesus. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of a good confession for preparing ourselves for the grace of Christmas. Today's Gospel reminds us in striking terms of just *who* it is whose coming we prepare: the charming child of Bethlehem is the same eternal Son of God who will one day judge the living and the dead. He comes to us now in mercy so that we may not dread his second coming in justice: but a gift must be accepted in order to be enjoyed.

When we think of the God who “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil 2:7) to be born in a poor stable, we realise that many of the comforts in our own life are in fact quite useless. Is there perhaps something we could do without this Advent, in order to attach ourselves more to heavenly goods? Needless to say: mortification is a means and not an end in itself. Spiritual mortification – especially the mortification of our tongue, our imagination and our judgment – is even more important than physical mortification.

Even if we ourselves do not have the financial means to give generously to others, we can certainly still use Advent to practice the other corporal and spiritual works of mercy. In particular, we must never forget that spiritual poverty is one of the greatest tragedies of our time. One way for us to practice the spiritual works of mercy during Advent would be to invite a friend or relative to Mass – especially if that person is a lapsed Catholic who, perhaps, is just waiting for our invitation. Let us make a point of spreading our Christian joy and sharing the graces of Advent with others. If we can make some concrete effort in each of these areas – spiritual life, sacrifice, charity – we shall, in the words of today's Postcommunion, “with becoming honour prepare for the approaching solemnities of our redemption.”

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