

1st Sunday of Advent – Cycle A

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, although 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 through 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 2:1-5

Isaiah, the most prolific writer of all the prophets, lived in Jerusalem and prophesied from 742 to 701 B.C. The name Isaiah means "Yahweh is salvation." A legend in the apocryphal *Martyrdom of Isaiah* holds that he was martyred by being placed in a hollow log and sawn in half.

Our reading for today talks of Zion in the days to come. This vision of all nations gathering on Mount Zion is found, with few changes, in Micah 4:1-3. It is impossible to say with certainty which of the two books is the original, or whether both authors borrowed from a common source.

¹ This is what Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. ² In days to come,

Not pointing to a particular event, it simply means "in the future".

The mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills.

The precise location here is the northern part of the eastern hill of Jerusalem, which is the site of the Temple [Mount Moriah (2 Chronicles 3:1)]. Jerusalem was built upon two hills (the eastern and the western). The name Zion was given to the western hill, which is larger and higher than the eastern one. Archaeological exploration and the fact that the only spring which was available to ancient Jerusalem is found on the eastern hill show conclusively that the city was built first on the eastern hill, south of the Temple. It has been suggested that the Biblical Zion means the walled city of the eastern hill and the unwalled extension of the inhabited area on the western hill

All nations shall stream toward it; ³ many peoples shall come and say: "Come, let us climb the LORD'S mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob,

Jacob's name was changed by God to "Israel" in Genesis 32:28.

That he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths." For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

Jerusalem becomes the center of instruction (Hebrew: *tora*) for all nations. The Torah was the way of life revealed by God to His people. The difference between the present and the ideal future is now Yahweh's Torah is rejected even by Judah, whereas then it will be accepted by all.

4 He shall judge between the nations,

Settle disputes, arbitrate between contending parties.

and impose terms on many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again.

The prophets conceive of the messianic age as a time of justice and peace which ensures Judah's later restoration. In the messianic kingdom the prophets generally see the Lord's house as the seat of authority and source is clear and certain doctrine; wars of conquest are renounced and Yahweh's general norms and specific judgments are accepted.

5 O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

Light is vision. The commandments of Yahweh give vision (Psalm 19:9). The light of the eyes is hope (Ezra 9:8). Yahweh is the creator of light (Genesis 1:3-5).

2nd Reading - Romans 13:11-14

Our reading today is an exhortation to the Roman Christians to realize that they are already living in the end times. The two ages have met. *Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come.*" (1 Corinthians 10:11).

11 [Y]ou know the time; it is the hour now

The period of Christian existence is *kairos*, a time when they are called upon to manifest by their actions that they are Christians and to conduct themselves suitably. Now is the time for men to appropriate to themselves by their faith and their deeds the effect of what Jesus once achieved for all.

for you to awake from sleep. For our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed;

Christians cannot afford to remain in the unprotected condition of being dressed in bedclothes at a time when the situation calls for armor. (see 1 Thessalonians 5:4-8).

"The time is short. ... The day of resurrection and of the terrible judgment is fast

approaching ... If you have done everything that was asked of you and are prepared for it, then you have nothing to fear, but if you have not, then look out! Paul is not trying to frighten his hearers but to encourage them, so as to detach them from their love of the things of this world. It was not unlikely that at the beginning of their endeavors they would be more dedicated and slacken off as time went on. But Paul wants them to do the opposite – not to slacken as time goes on but to become even more dedicated. For the nearer the King is, the more they ought to be ready to receive Him.” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 391), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans* 23]

¹² the night is advanced, the day is at hand.

Paul implies that not too long a time separates Christians from their end time salvation.

Let us then throw off the works of darkness (and) put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day,

The contrast of day and night, light and dark, is symbolic of good and evil. The “armor of light” is described in 1 Thessalonians 5:8 and Ephesians 6:13 as faith, hope, charity, fidelity, uprightness, etc. (the virtues).

not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy.

A catalog of vices that are the “works of darkness”

“Paul does not forbid alcohol; he is opposed only to its excessive use. Nor does he prohibit sexual intercourse; rather he is against fornication. What he wants to do is to get rid of the deadly passions of lust and anger. Therefore he does not merely attack them but goes to their source as well. For nothing kindles lust or wrath so much as excessive drinking.” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 391), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans* 24]

¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.

Let Christ be your armor. Through baptism the Christian has already “put on” Christ (Galatians 3:27), but that baptism (identification with Christ) must bear fruit in his conscious life; as he becomes progressively more and more aware of his Christian identity he withdraws more and more from sin. Instead of planning for nighttime behavior, the Christian concentrates on conduct which is consistent with their avowed interest in the Lord’s return.

Gospel - Matthew 24:37-44

In our gospel reading today Jesus is sharing with His disciples a teaching on the end times. He is in Jerusalem for His passion and is preparing the disciples for this event and what is to follow. The eleven verses immediately preceding our reading today help us to establish the context:

²⁶ So if they say to you, 'He is in the desert,' do not go out there; if they say, 'He is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. ²⁷ For just as lightning comes from the east and is seen as far as the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. (The Messiah will not come in some distant or secret place, it will be clear as lightening to all and as clearly discerned as a carcass is to a vulture.) ²⁹ "Immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. (This is imagery from Isaiah 13:10 and 34:4. The Temple was a microcosm of the world as the Jews knew it. When the Temple is destroyed, their world is destroyed.) ³⁰ And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming upon the clouds of heaven (Imagery from Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:12-14.) with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a trumpet blast, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other. ³² "Learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ In the same way, when you see all these things, know that he is near, at the gates. ³⁴ Amen, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. [The Temple is destroyed in A.D. 70, it is now A.D. 30/33. 40 years is a generation in Hebrew numerology. Josephus, the Jewish first century historian, described the use of the catapult in the siege of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) in these words "The watchmen that sat on the towers gave them notice when the engine was let go, and the stone came from it, and cried out aloud in their own country language, "THE SON IS COMING." (The Wars of the Jews, 5.6.3§272)]. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁶ "But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

³⁷ For as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ In (those) days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day that Noah entered the ark. ³⁹ They did not know until the flood came and carried them all away. So will it be (also) at the coming of the Son of Man.

This warning about the deluge is significant: it does not say that men were sinning, but that they were engaged in innocent secular occupations. Their sin was to give no thought to impending catastrophe. The disciples are warned against that interest in secular business that makes them forget the parousia.

⁴⁰ Two men will be out in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come.

The parousia will manifest the difference between people; a difference that is not now apparent (see also Luke 17:34-35). Two men plowing or two women grinding meal share the same occupation and look alike externally, but God knows the difference and will make it clear. The precise meaning of “taken” and “left” is not made clear, nor need it be. Those who are “taken” will be taken because they are ready; they have shown the vigilance that is necessary for the coming of the Son of Man.

⁴³ Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into.

⁴⁴ So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.

It will come without warning. This is a rather bold comparison of the Son of Man with a thief in the night. The same imagery is used in 1 Thessalonians 5:2.