

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

READING I Is 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7

READING II 1 Cor 1:3-9

GOSPEL Mk 13:33-37

This selection from Third Isaiah (Is 56-66) is part of a longer communal lament written at a time when Jerusalem was still in ruin and God seemed all too aloof. Significantly, this passage opens and closes with the rare use of the title "father." As father, The Lord God is present and tends to the needs of his community. V 17a charges God with neglect, while v 17b urges The Lord God to return to his heritage. Next follows the wish that The Lord God would appear with all the trappings of his majesty to offer Israel necessary help. At this point, the community looks back nostalgically on the miracles of the past and frankly admits that they can never occur again. In the confession of sin that follows, Israel admits that her sinfulness provoked God's wrath. However, the passage concludes on a note of hopefulness. The Lord God, father/ creator, is aware of the creaturely status of Israel. To be the work of God's hands is to maintain hope.

Writing First Corinthians around the spring of 57 A.D., Paul concludes his greeting by using the Old Testament formulary "grace and peace." "Grace" connotes God's covenantal favor while "peace" is a result of such favor. In his thanksgiving: "every gift of speed and knowledge" refers to the charismatic gifts of the Corinthian community which Paul will later discuss in chs. 12-14. Since Corinthians tended to concentrate merely on the present, Paul chooses to remind them that the past and the future are also bound up with the present. Paul thereby emphasizes that ongoing effort is required. In the last line, Paul mentions "fellowship", a quality sorely lacking among the Corinthians. Yet it is to this that God has called them in Christ.

Mark 13 is Jesus' farewell discourse. The intent of such a discourse is to prepare a community for future events. Mark's community sought an explanation to the following question: Why the delay of the Parousia (Second Coming), especially since Jesus spoke of an imminent return? Although Mark himself may have anticipated an early return, he points out in this discourse that only the Father knows the exact day or hour. In the period prior to the return, vigilance is required. Hence the key phrase of Mark 13 is "be on guard."

Verses 34-36 are the parable of the doorkeeper. Mark has adapted the parable to underline the need to be vigilant. The master of the house is now Jesus, who will make his return at the Parousia. The doorkeeper represents the waiting community.

Concluding the discourse, Jesus bestows authority on his disciples. An authority, however, that implies service. In the difficult period preceding the Parousia, vigilance is the form of service which will prepare the community for the consummation of God's plan: The triumphal return of his Son.

To wait on others is to await the return. We can live the present for ourselves, as though the Parousia were a remote possibility not touching our lives. We can operate in the present for ourselves, regarding the second coming as a purely personal reward and encounter. We can exist in the present for ourselves, assuming that Jesus' return makes no special demands on us now. In such instances, however, we fail to realize that to wait on others is to await the return.

Paul was a realist who insisted on service as the Christian way of life in preparing for the Parousia. He speaks of "waiting for the revelation" and being "blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus." In his thanksgiving, however, Paul hints of problems in the community. "Speech and knowledge" are gifts of the Spirit which look to the Lord's service, not self-gratification. They are for the common good. "Fellowship" intimates the lack of concern manifested at the Corinthian Eucharist, where the needs of all were not being respected. For Paul, to wait on others is to await the return.

Mark insists on vigilance in the time prior to the Parousia. However, he also describes the manner of such vigilance, namely, being in charge, having authority. In Mark, to have authority is to serve, not to be served. Fidelity in one's task is, for Mark, the way of anticipating the Parousia. To welcome the returning Lord, one must welcome the sisters and brothers of the same Lord. For Mark, to wait on others is to await the return.

Husbands and wives who wait on each other, in developing their mutual love, are awaiting the Lord. A single person who looks to the needs of the people his/her world comprises are expecting the Lord. Employers who provide for the total welfare of their employees are anticipating the Lord's return. Leaders who promote the common good, not their personal fancies, look forward to the Parousia. All who are intent upon serving others affirm that to wait on others is to await the return.

Eucharist looks to the Lord's final return ("Christ will come again"). At the same time, Eucharist offers the stance of the self-giving Jesus as the model for the community. Eucharist urges the community to reflect that stance in meeting mutual needs. Eucharist thereby proclaims that to wait on others is to await the return.