

ADVENT: A WAKE-UP CALL FROM SPIRITUAL DROWSINESS

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT REFLECTION

In the life of our Church, each new *Liturgical Year* begins on the first Sunday of Advent.

The *Liturgical Year* is the way our Church *celebrates, relives* and *makes present* to us Christ and the main events in his life. It is the way that our Church keeps placing before us the story of Jesus.

The **Catechism of the Catholic Church** tells us: "*We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus' life and his mysteries.*" So through the ebb and flow of each Liturgical Year, we seek, with the guidance of our Church, to live and internalize the events of Christ's life.

Two liturgical seasons

Nature has four seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter. Our Church year has two main seasons: the *Advent-Christmas* season and the *Lent-Easter* season. Christmas celebrates the Incarnation of Jesus—God becoming one of us. Easter celebrates the death and Resurrection of Christ. Each season has a time of *preparation*. We prepare for the Feast of the Incarnation with four weeks of *Advent*. We prepare for the *sacred Triduum* (Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Vigil) with 40 days of *Lent*. Both events (Incarnation and Redemption) have an *extended period* of celebration. We do not just celebrate Christ's coming on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. We celebrate it for *twelve days*, culminating with the *Feast of the Baptism of Jesus*. We do not just celebrate Christ's Resurrection on Easter Sunday. We celebrate it for *50 days*, culminating with the Feast of Pentecost.

Advent

The word Advent, from the Latin word *advenio*, means "to come." The focus of Advent are the two comings of Christ: his coming in the flesh 2,000 years ago and his still awaited Second Coming. Today's first reading looks forward to the first coming of Christ. Our second and third readings encourage us to be prepared and ready for the Second Coming of Christ. In between these two great comings of Christ, we have his daily comings in the events and encounters of our everyday lives and, of course, his coming to us every time we celebrate the Eucharist.

First readings

During the four weeks of Advent, our first readings will be from the great Old Testament prophet Isaiah who, in a time of great darkness for Israel, tried to keep their hopes alive. In this Sunday's first reading, Isaiah tells the people:

In the days to come...All nations shall come to the Lord's house...where he will instruct them in his ways.

In a special way, during the Advent season, we are called to allow God to speak to our hearts and instruct us in his ways. One of the ways that he wants to teach us is the way of peace. Again, listen to Isaiah speak to us in today's readings.

People will 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.

These beautiful words of Isaiah have a special meaning for us this Advent because we are a nation at war. But as President Bush had said; "*It is not a war that we have chosen, but it is a war we must fight if we are to protect our nation from those who hate us.*" But in Isaiah's vision of reality, nations would not wage war. For this vision, we must continue to work and pray. How? By doing all that we can to end any wars going on within our own network of relationships, be it within our families or neighborhoods. All of us would gladly chant "No more wars! No more wars!" and yet we do little or nothing to quell conflicts within our own relationships. Our celebration of Advent would be a success if we only made every effort to forge peace where there was discord. If our hearts are so hardened that this is not our desire, we will have little to celebrate or offer the Prince of Peace when he comes into our midst.

Second readings

The second readings during Advent are taken from the New Testament epistles, mostly from Paul, but this year we will also have a second reading from James.

This Sunday's second reading is especially powerful. It is a call to **wake up** from spiritual drowsiness and to put aside "*deeds of darkness,*" such as "*carousing and drunkenness, lust, rivalry and jealousy.*" These are the words God used

to call the great St. Augustine out of his darkness and unbelief. As he was sitting in his garden one day, he heard a voice within say, "take and read." He picked up the Bible and his eyes fell on today's verses from Romans. The words hit him like a ton of bricks and changed his whole life, which led to his baptism. Eventually, he became a great bishop, teacher and saint in our Church family.

How do we need to wake up?

St. Irenaeus, another saint from the early centuries of Christianity, once said: "**The glory of God is man fully alive.**" Unfortunately, none of us is *fully spiritually* alive. Too often, we go through our days and years half asleep, unaware of God's love for us, deaf to the promptings of the Spirit within us, and deaf and blind to many other realities that God would want us to be awake to. A good question for all of us to ponder this weekend is: To what extent am I spiritually asleep? Why am I allowing the thousand other voices clamoring for my attention this season, to shut out the voice of God's Spirit who wants to instruct me in his ways? Will I let preoccupation with parties, decorations, shopping, etc., to push aside the concerns of God? Hopefully not, but it will take much discipline on our part to make Jesus truly the reason for the season.

Gospel: Year of Matthew

When it comes to the Sunday readings, the Church speaks about a **Three-Year Cycle: A, B and C**. During *Cycle A* which begins today, we mainly listen to Gospel passages from *Matthew*; hence, we call it the *Year of Matthew*. During *Cycle B* we listen to *Mark*, and during *Cycle C*, which we have just finished, we listen to *Luke*. During the seven Sundays of the Easter season and on some other Sundays, we listen to passages from John's Gospel.

Each Gospel has its own particular audience and characteristics. The following are a few of the main characteristics of *Matthew's* Gospel.

First, Matthew's Gospel is sometimes called the "*Jewish Gospel*" because it was written mainly for Jews who had become Christians but who were still very attached to their Jewish beliefs and heritage. In Matthew's Gospel, more than in the others, we hear these words: "*This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet...*" By using these words, Matthew was seeking to show his Jewish audience that Jesus was the fulfillment of all the longings and prophecies of Israel, expressed in the Old Testament.

Second, Matthew's Gospel, more than the others, is a *teaching* Gospel. In Matthew (Chapters 5,6,7), Jesus gives five great discourses beginning with his famous *Sermon on the Mount*, regarded as the heart of what Jesus came to teach us.

Third, Matthew's is the only Gospel that speaks about the *Church*. His famous Caesarea-Philippi passage in 16:13-23 is often seen as Jesus instituting his Church: "*You are Peter and upon this rock, I will build my church.*" In Matthew, disputes are settled by the *Church*.

Today's Gospel: stay awake, be vigilant.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus urges us to be ready for his Second Coming, which the early Christians believed would happen in their lifetime. Perhaps, none of us believes that Jesus' Second Coming will happen in our lifetime, yet this Sunday's Gospel clearly states that it will come suddenly and like a thief in the night. Jesus' Second Coming will, most likely, catch us unaware—hence, the supreme importance of constant readiness and vigilance. We must not become so immersed in earthly matters that we forget about heavenly concerns. In today's Gospel, Jesus exhorts us to "*stay awake*" and to live daily in readiness for his Second Coming or for our own moment of death.

Practical suggestions for Advent

1. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to see how and where you want Jesus to come into your life this season. Is there an area of your life that you have excluded Jesus from (e.g., relationships, finances, business dealings, a buried hurt from the past, etc.)? How wonderful if during this Advent, Jesus is invited into an area of your life where he has been excluded from. If this happens, you will have much to celebrate on Christmas Eve/Day.
2. Include the poor in your Christmas budget, e.g., our *Angel Tree Project*.
3. Go to confession—it is good for the soul and it will give us a fresh start.
4. Pray around the Advent wreath if you have one. Light it at dinnertime. The Advent wreath is a reminder of the four weeks of Advent. You can use the following prayer from this Sunday's Mass the first time you light your Advent wreath. Adults and children can add any prayers of petition that they may have.

Father in heaven, our hearts desire the warmth of your love and our minds are searching for the light of your Word. Increase our longing for Christ our Savior and give us the strength to grow in love, that the dawn of his coming may find us rejoicing in his presence and welcoming the light of his truth. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen.