

A LITURGICAL YEAR WITH TWO MAIN SEASONS AND THIRTY FOUR SUNDAYS IN ORDINARY TIME

Reflection for the First Sunday of Advent, Cycle A

The liturgical year is the way our church *celebrates, relives and makes present* Christ, his teachings and the main events in his life. It is the way that our church keeps placing before us the story of Jesus.

The Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy (one of Vatican II's documents) states: "*Within the cycle of a year. . . The church unfolds the whole mystery of Christ. . . From his incarnation and birth until his ascension. . .*" **The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us:** "*We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus' life and his mysteries...For it is the plan of the Son of God to make us and the whole church partake in his mysteries and to extend them and to continue them in us and in his whole church*" (#1095). So through the ebb and flow of each liturgical year we seek, with the guidance of our church, to live and internalize Christ's teachings and the events of his life.

Two Main Liturgical Seasons

Each Liturgical Year has two main seasons.

- The Advent/Christmas Season
- The Lent/Easter Season.

During the *Twelve Days of Christmas* we celebrate the First Coming of Jesus into the world—his manifestation to his own people and to the Gentile world (Feast of the Epiphany). We *prepare* for the Twelve Days of Christmas with *Four Weeks of Advent*— a word which means 'coming'. During the Advent season we focus on three comings of Jesus.

- His coming 2,000 years ago
- His Second Coming at some future time.
- His Daily Comings into the events and encounters of our daily lives.

In between the two great seasons of the year, we have 34 Sundays in *Ordinary Time*.

A Church Year with Three cycles of Readings

If you were raised in the pre-Vatican II church you listened to the same set of readings each year. Not only that, but you only heard two readings. Since the revision of the lectionary after Vatican II, we have three cycles A, B and C, each with its own set of *three* readings. Sometimes the cycles are called by the name of the gospel that we listen to during a particular cycle. Hence.

- *Cycle A* is sometimes called the *Year of Matthew* because the gospel reading is normally from Matthew.
- *Cycle B* is sometimes called the *Year of Mark*.
- *Cycle C* is sometimes referred to as the *Year of Luke*.

Last weekend we finished the *Cycle C* set of readings. Today we begin to listen to the *Cycle A* readings.

John does not have a cycle of readings like the other three evangelists. But, we do listen to passages from John's gospel during the Easter Season of all three cycles. Also passages of John are read now and again in all three cycles. For example, during Lent this year we listen to three powerful Gospels from John.

The first and second readings

The first reading is always a passage from the Old Testament—except during the Easter season when the first reading in all three cycles is from the Acts of the Apostles. The second reading is always from one of the New Testament Epistles or from the Book of Revelation. During the Sunday's of Ordinary time this reading stands on its own. It was not chosen to connect with the other two readings. But, it was chosen to connect with the other readings during Advent and Lent. Sometimes this connection is easy to detect, sometimes it is not.

The advantage of a three year cycle of readings is that we listen to a very wide diversity of scripture readings during a three year period, readings that *comfort* us and readings that *challenge* us, readings that always *instruct* us in the ways of God. Because local pastors do not decide on the readings proclaimed in church, they sometimes have to preach on scriptures that they may prefer to pass over. Churches without a lectionary of three cycles may never hear a sermon on some passages of scriptures—passages which a local pastor may not wish to deal with.

The Year of Matthew

Today, on this first Sunday of Advent Cycle A, we listen to the Gospel of *Matthew*.

Characteristics of Matthew's Gospel

- Matthew's gospel is the *most Jewish Gospel of the four*. Luke was a Gentile and he wrote his gospel mainly for gentile readers. Matthew was deeply rooted in his Jewish tradition. He wrote his gospel mainly for Jews who had become Christians and perhaps for Jews who were thinking about becoming Christian. Matthew goes to great lengths to demonstrate that all the prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus. Hence, he must be the Messiah that his people waited for. A recurring line that we often read in Matthew's gospel is: "*This was to fulfill what was written in the prophets. . .*" Matthew's primary purpose was to show how Old Testament prophecies received their fulfillment in Jesus.
- Matthew's gospel is very much a *teaching gospel*. In Matthew we find Five Sermons or Discourses.
 - The Sermon on the Mount (chs5-7)
 - The Missionary Sermon (10:5-42)
 - The Seven Parables about the Kingdom (13:1-52)
 - The Sermon about Church Life (18:1-35)
 - The Sermon about the End Times (24:1-25, 46)
- A *Gospel of the Church*. Matthew is the only Gospel that speaks about the church. By the time Matthew had written his Gospel about 80 A.D., the church was fairly well organized and had become a dominant factor in the life of the Christian. Chapter 18 of Matthew speaks to how disputes in the church should be resolved.

A Daily Devotional for our Liturgical Year

Fr. Mark Link S. J. has done our church a great service by providing our church with a daily devotional for all three cycles of our liturgical year. Fr. Mark begins his devotional by quoting a verse from one of the scriptures read in church each day. Then he has a brief reflection on the verse followed with a question for our reflection. He ends each devotional with another verse from scripture or with a quote from a known or unknown person. In his C Cycle devotional, Fr. Mark ended one his devotionals with this quote:

Every job is a self-portrait of the person who did it.

Autograph your work with quality

Author unknown

The following is Fr. Link's devotional on a verse from today's liturgy of the word:

[Jesus said,]

"If the owner of a house knew the time when the thief would come. . .

He would stay awake. . . .

So then, you also must always be ready, because the Son of Man will come . . .

When you are not expecting him."

Matthew 24:43-44

One day, while filing away papers, the secretary of President J. F. Kennedy found this note, written in the president's own hand. It read:

"I know there is a God-
and I see a storm coming.
If he has a place for me,
I believe that I am ready."

Jesus' warning to be ready and Kennedy's readiness to serve invite me to ask:

How ready am I to put myself at God's service for whatever God may ask me to do?

The title of Fr. Link's daily devotional for Cycle A is *Vision 2000*.

An Advent Prayer

The following is the opening prayer from today's Mass. If you light the candles of an Advent Wreath at home this season, you could use this prayer.

*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.*