

The First Sunday of Advent (Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 2:1-5
<i>Response</i>	Let us go rejoicing to the house of the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 122: 1-2, 3-4, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 13:11-14
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Show us, Lord, your love; and grant us your salvation.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 24:37-44

Welcome everybody to the first video of our new series for the new liturgical year of the Gospel of Matthew. We will be doing Year A together. Before I begin, I just want to thank everyone out there who helped contribute to our kickstarter program and made these series of videos a reality. I'm really excited to be journeying with you, together, through the Gospel of Matthew over the course of this new liturgical year. I hope that you are going to look forward to and enjoy all of the lecture notes, handouts and transcripts, and everything we are going to try to do this year to make the Gospel of Matthew come alive. So without any further adieu we are going to dive into our first video for the First Sunday of Advent in Year A.

We start, of all places, with the mysterious passage of Jesus about one man being taken and one man being left, His mysterious teaching on the unexpected coming of the Son of Man, which most people think refers to the rapture. So it's a very odd way to begin the liturgical year, but that is how the Church does it, so let's dive into the Gospel and see why this text is selected, what it means, what it doesn't mean, and how it links with the Old Testament reading and the Psalm for the day.

So the First Sunday of Advent doesn't begin at the beginning of the Gospel, where you might think it would begin, it begins in Jesus' famous discourse on the Mount of Olives, called the Olivet discourse, where he gives a lot of his teaching about the end times, about the eschaton, the last days. And in this case, the Church picks, as the first Gospel for the year, Matthew 24:37-44. This is Jesus's prophecy of the coming of the Son of Man in the days of Noah. So let's read it through together and ask a few questions. It reads as follows:

As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man. Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left. Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.¹

So what is Jesus talking about? What is this passage all about? The first thing I want to say here, and this is very important, is to emphasize that although some Christians claim that Jesus is talking about a secret rapture of true believers, in which some people will be taken, they will disappear mysteriously, if they really believe in Jesus, and others will be “left behind,” that is not what Jesus is referring to. What Jesus is referring to in this passage is his second coming at the end of time. He's referring to the final judgment, not to a secret rapture of true believers.

Let me give you a few reasons why he's referring to the final judgment, you can see it by looking at the context:

1. Although the lectionary doesn't have this verse, the verse immediately before the first line “as were the days of Noah,” is the famous verse where Jesus says “no one knows the day or the hour.” And that verse is referring to when heaven and earth will pass away, that no one knows when that's going to be, not even the angels, only the Father knows. So that reference to the day or the hour, is the day or hour of final judgment. That's the first point, the context is about the final judgment

2. Jesus' allusion to the days of Noah shows you that this is about the cosmic judgment, the judgment of the whole world. Because at the time of Noah, if you go back to Genesis 6-9, what Genesis describes is a global flood where all the wicked people in the whole world perish in the judg-

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

ment of God, and only a few people, 8 people, are saved from the judgment of God. So what Jesus is doing is making a comparison. Just as in the days of Noah, many people were busy marrying and giving in marriage, eating, drinking, and not getting ready for the global judgment of the flood, so to, at the coming of the Son of Man, many people are going to be just consumed with the things of this world, and they won't be ready for the final judgment. They won't be ready for, the Greek word, the parousia, the coming of the Son of Man, when he will come to judge the world. Just like God judged the whole world at the time of the flood.

3. This is really critical. If you look at it, you can see that when Jesus says one is taken and one is left, whether one man is taken and one man is left or one woman is taken and one woman is left (again if you think about the imagery of the of the flood as the background to what he is saying), what happened here? Noah's family was taken. In other words, they were saved from the judgment of the flood, and the rest of people were left, but they weren't left behind to live on the world and have time to repent or something like that, they were left out of the salvation and exposed to the flood, and they perished in the judgment of God. So what Jesus is essentially getting at here is the separation of the righteous and the wicked that will take place at the final judgment. If you want an analogy with this, you can look at the very next chapter in Matthew, the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, where Jesus separates the righteous from the wicked, he separates the sheep from the goats, and the righteous go into the eternal kingdom of the Father, whereas the goats go into the eternal fire of destruction prepared for the devil and his angels. So this is the separation of the final judgment, it's not a secret rapture of true believers. And, in fact, Jesus himself says that when he says so will it be at the parousia, the coming of the Son of Man. This is the second coming, right, it's not a secret rapture of true believers. That word never occurs.

4. All this is very clear if you look at the ending of the passage, because what's the main thrust of the passage? It's the unexpected nature of the judgment. In other words, you don't know exactly when the Son of Man is going to come at the end of time. He uses a couple different images for this. He says watch, because you don't know on what day the Lord is coming. So he says keep awake, so it's kind of like keep vigil for the coming of the Son of Man. But then also, he uses the parable of the thief in the night.

So he said if a householder had known what time and night the thief was going to break in, he would've been ready, he would've stayed awake. So too you also need to stay up, need to be awake, you need to keep watch and be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. And that last verse ties it back around to the earlier verse in Matthew 24:35-6, which says that the hour of heaven and earth passing away is unknown.

So the whole context of this passage isn't about a secret rapture, it's about the final judgment. It's about the second advent. It's about the parousia of Christ at the end of time. That's a really short analysis here, if you want more on that, I did a whole Bible study on the rapture called Jesus and the End Times: A Catholic View of the Last Days, where I go through some of the other problems with that view. But I just wanted to knock it out here because it is very important for you to see, that the Church begins the liturgical year of the Gospel of Matthew, begins the first Sunday of Advent, not with a passage about the rapture, it begins the first Sunday of Advent with a passage about the final advent, about the second coming of Christ at the end of time, which is already going to give us a clue as to what the Season of Advent is going to be about. It's about preparing us, not just for the first coming of Christ at Christmas, but preparing us for the final coming, the final advent of Christ, at the end of time.

Okay, so that is the Gospel for the day. Now let's go back to the Old Testament reading and see if we can see how it connects with the New Testament reading. Now in this case it might be a little more difficult, because we're going to go to some passages that might not be as familiar to us. The first one is from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Now most people are familiar with Isaiah's prophecies of the suffering servant who dies for the sins of many, or the anointed one who comes to proclaim good news, but this prophecy is from earlier in the book. It is from Isaiah 2 and it's a description of Isaiah's vision of the future age of salvation, of the latter days as the prophets would say, what the age of salvation is going to look like. And this is what Isaiah tells us, Isaiah 2:1-5 say:

The word which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD

shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many peoples shall come, and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

So what is Isaiah talking about here? Well, on the one hand, it might sound like he's just describing people going up to Jerusalem to the earthly temple to celebrate one of the festivals, like Passover, and that's certainly some the language that he is using. But if you look at it carefully, he's clearly saying more than that. He's talking about a future age that's in the far distant future, he calls it the latter days. This is where we get the language of end times. He describing a period of time in which Jerusalem will become the highest of all the mountains of the earth. I've been to Jerusalem, I did archaeology there back in the late 90s, and it is true, the city of Jerusalem is perched on a mountain. You have to go up to get to to Jerusalem, but it is by no means the highest of the mountains of the earth. It is a far cry from that. So what is Isaiah describing here? How can he say that Jerusalem will be the highest of the mountains in all of the earth?

What he is using here is an image of a new Jerusalem, when Jerusalem is going to be transformed, it's going to be exalted, because he's describing the new creation. As we will see at the end of the Book of Isaiah, he's going to say that God is going to make a new Jerusalem, he's going to make a new heavens and a new earth. This is Isaiah 64-66, and that's what this prophecy is about. It's a prophecy of the new creation, and of the fact that, at that time, God is going to come, and he's going to judge between the nations, between the righteous and the unrighteous, and at that time people are going to beat their swords, which would be used for war, into

plowshares, and their spears, which would be used in battle, into pruning hooks. In other words, there is going to be an end to warfare. It's going to be a time of peace, a time of salvation, and nation shall not lift up swords against nation, and there shall not be any war anymore. Clearly that is referring to a new creation, a new heavens and a new earth, in which strife and conflict between peoples will completely cease, and God will judge between the righteous and the wicked.

So this is a prophecy of the future age, and you can see that by beginning with this prophecy, the Church is having us look, once again, to the final judgment, to the new creation, to the new heavens and the new earth, and to the new Jerusalem of the age of salvation. Which, by the way, just as a side note before I move on, notice here that many Christians will say that in the first century A.D., all that the Jews were hoping for was a military Messiah to overthrow the Romans, kick them out of Jerusalem, and reestablish their sovereignty over the earthly land of Israel. While that was true for some Jews, like the zealots, if you look at the books of the Prophets, they're waiting for much much more than that. They are waiting for a new heavens and a new earth. They are waiting for a new creation and a new Jerusalem, a world totally made new, and that's what they are hoping for and longing for when Jesus steps on to the scene at the time of the Gospels, and the time of the New Covenant.

So with that in mind, then, we turn to the Responsorial Psalm. How do we respond to this prophecy of Isaiah? Well the Church places on our lips a psalm that we saw just a few weeks ago in the Gospel of Luke, which is Psalm 122, Let us go up rejoicing to the house of the Lord. Psalm 122:1 and following say:

I was glad when they said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the LORD!" Our feet have been standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem!

Jerusalem, built as a city
which is bound firmly together,
to which the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD. !

and if you skip down to verse 6, it says:

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!
"May they prosper who love you!
Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers!" !

For my brethren and companions' sake
I will say, "Peace be within you!"

This is a very beautiful, very powerful image here of the city of Jerusalem being a city of peace. Now, once again, on the level of the literal sense of the text, this is describing people going up to Jerusalem and there being peace within the walls of the city, probably at one of the festivals or something like that. But if we connect it with the New Testament here, what does it point forward to? It points forward to the ultimate peace that will reign in the new Jerusalem, that was spoken of by Isaiah in the prophecy of the latter days, the final judgment, and the new heavens and the new earth. So that's why the Church places these words of the Psalm on our lips, because it's trying to get us to think about a time, which is hard to imagine in these days of war and strife and bloodshed, when Jerusalem will be at peace. A time when, not just Jerusalem, but the whole creation will be at peace, and there will be no more crying, nor more pain or bloodshed anymore, because God will have made all things new.

And that is of course what the Church teaches and what Christians have always believed will happen at the second advent of Christ, at the final judgment at the end of time. He will come to judge the living and the dead. The dead will be raised and then the world will be restored, the world will be renewed in a new heavens and a new earth, a new creation.

Okay, so that's the links between the Old Testament, the Psalm and the Gospel, but remember, we are in the Season of Advent now, and so there's a thematic connection, there is one last text we want to look at, and that is from the letter of St. Paul, which, during the festival seasons and during certain Solemnities and Feast Days, is connected with these other readings by means of the particular theme. In this case, the Church has chosen a very important passage from Romans 13:11 and following. You'll easily see how this is connected to the theme of the final judgment and Christ's second coming. So this is what St. Paul has to say to the Romans, Romans 13:11 says:

Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

This is a very powerful text. One of the things you will notice about the readings from St. Paul, in the lectionary, is that it frequently focuses on morality and spirituality. So, in other words, how do we take the message of the other texts that deal with prophecy or typology or eschatology, the doctrine of the end times, and apply it to our lives today. That is frequently where the reading from Paul comes in, and we can see him doing that here. So notice here he makes a few points.

You know what hour it is, because we have seen Jesus himself use the image of an hour to describe the hour of judgment. And so he says, because the hour has come, you need to wake up from your sleep. Now he is not talking about literal sleep, but a kind of moral or spiritual sleep, where people aren't living their life in Christ, that they received through Baptism, to the fullness. So he said, because salvation is closer to us now than when we first believed, the night is far gone and the day is at hand. That's another image for the day of judgment that we will see in the Old Testament, not just the day, but the image of the sun rising. That the coming time of judgment, is not just a time of fire, it's the son of Justice rising in the righteous people of God. So he is saying we are like at the threshold of dawn and we need to wake up and be ready to meet the son, who is coming in both senses of the word.

So how do we do that? Paul says very practically here's how you get ready for the second coming. You cast off the works of darkness, which is a metaphor for works of sin or immorality. And he actually lists some very specific actions here as he is exhorting the Romans. He says to stop engaging in reveling or, as the New American Bible translates it, orgies. So what is that referring to? The Greek word there, *kômos*, referred to these extravagant feasts that the Greeks would engage in, usually surrounding the festival of Dionysus. And these feasts would include, not just gluttony, but drunkenness and also sexual immorality. So these feasts were known for that and many of the Christians who in the first century had been pagans, had a hard time leaving that aspect of their pagan life behind. So Paul says you have to cast that off, that is a work of darkness and it's not fitting that you be engaged in

that if you're preparing to meet the light of the coming son of God. Drunkenness, cast off works of drunkenness, or debauchery, here again the image in Greek (the Greek word is *koitê*), literally means bedding. So again it is referring to sexual immorality that was rife, it was rampant within the pagan world of the first century A.D. He also says to cast off licentiousness or lust, drunkenness, as well as quarreling or divisiveness. Another way to translate this is rivalry, so a kind of pitting of one person against another. Family members against one another, within towns, countries and nation, divisiveness, quarreling, factionalism, jealousy strife. All those things have no place in the Church of God and so we need to cast those things away as works of darkness to be ready to meet Christ at the final judgment.

Instead of those works of darkness, notice what he says, we need to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. So he is using a metaphor here of clothing, that the grace and the righteousness of Christ is like clothing, and we need to take off the clothing of darkness and put on the works of Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, which is Paul's technical term, not for the body, the body is good according to Paul and ancient Judaism, the flesh refers to this fallen world and the disordered desires that are part of our experience of this fallen world, after the fall of our first parents, after the fall of Adam and Eve, that Paul would have known well, from the book of Genesis. So we put off the works of darkness and the flesh and we put on the armor of light in order to prepare for the day of judgment. Because, let's face it, Paul's right. Although it's been 2000 years since Christ came, we are nearer to salvation now than we were when we first believed. And that's true, not just at the level of all humanity, but it's true for each individual person as well, because none of us knows, not only when the final judgment will be, don't we don't know when our particular judgment will be, when we will encounter Christ at the moment of our death. He may not come during our lifetime, but we will encounter him as judge at the particular judgment, at the hour of our death, which we know is coming sooner rather than later. There is only a certain timeframe in which that can happen.

In closing then, you might be thinking at this point, Dr. Pitre, what does any of this have to do with Advent? I thought Advent was the season where we buy Christmas gifts and get ready for the birth of baby Jesus. And it's true, we do both of those things, but the Church has chosen these particular readings for a very important reason. So again, I'm going to have recourse over the course of our study together to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, I'm going to reference it occasionally. And in this case, the Catechism has a really important passage on Advent that helps us understand why we just read about the parousia, the final judgment, the new

creation, and all those things for the first Sunday of the liturgical year. On page 524, the Catechism says this:

When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Savior's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming. By celebrating the precursor's birth and martyrdom, the Church unites herself to his desire: "He must increase, but I must decrease." (CCC 524)

So what's going on then during the Advent season, you'll see this as we move through the readings of the four weeks of Advent, is there is a twofold meaning. On the one hand, the Church is going to be giving us a lot of prophecies from the Old Testament about the coming of the Messiah, the age of salvation, and the new creation, in order to kind of put us back into the shoes of the Jews in the first century who are waiting for the Messiah's first coming. And that first coming, obviously, is going to happen with the incarnation, with the birth of Christ at Christmas. But, the church also wants us to prepare, precisely by looking at those prophecies, for the final advent, the final coming of Christ at the end of time. So She's going to give us both. And what you will see is, as we get close to Christmas, the readings will focus more and more on the first advent of Christ, in his birth in Bethlehem.

Now, the practical application in closing. You can see what the Church is exhorting us to do if we look at one of the prayers for this first Sunday of Advent. So for the First Sunday of Advent, the official prayer of the priest, it is called the Collect (it is sometimes called the opening prayer, which is one of the prayers read at the beginning of the Mass), says:

Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God,
the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ
with righteous deeds at his coming, so that, gathered at his right hand, they
may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever .

So that's what the Church is calling us to do, and it is one of the reasons we use purple during the Advent season. It should be a time where we we have a spirit of penance, a spirit of penitence, as we prepare our hearts and prepare our minds to

meet Christ, to encounter him, both in the manger at Christmas, but also in his final judgment. We want to resolve to run to him and meet him with righteous deeds and penitent hearts, and that's really that the essence of the Advent season, is joyful expectation, turning away from sin, and having joyful expectation at the coming our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.