

1st Sunday in Advent

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7
<i>Response</i>	Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 1:3-9
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Show us Lord, your love; and grant us your salvation
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 13:33-37

Welcome everyone to the beginning of a new liturgical year starting with the season of Advent. We are now in Year B, in which the Church starts a whole new cycle of readings in the three-year cycle of Sunday readings. We are going to focus this year on the second Gospel, the Gospel according to St. Mark. So one of the things I want say before we begin is just to keep in mind that Advent, although for us in the secular year is the end of the year, in the liturgical year it is the beginning. So the Church is going to give us, for the next four weeks, a series of very carefully selected readings that are meant to help us enter into the Advent season, which as you are going to see precisely through the readings, is different than the Christmas season. Sometimes people tend to get them mixed up with one another, but the Advent season is really the season of preparation and it consists of these four Sundays. So for this year we are going to begin the first Sunday of Advent with a new gospel, the gospel of St. Mark. And we are going to start in a place that might be a little surprising to you.

You might think, “well it is the beginning of a new year, so we are going to start at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark.” But that's not the case, because for Advent what the Church wants us to do is to make two acts of preparation. First, the obvious one would be the preparation for the celebration of Christmas, which is to come immediately after the Advent season. But the second act of preparation is preparation for the second coming of Christ, or preparation for the second advent of Christ. So because those two themes are at the heart of the season of Advent, the Church begins this liturgical year with a reading from the Gospel of Mark. Not

the beginning of Mark, but actually toward the end of Mark's gospel in Mark 13:33-37. This is from the Olivet discourse of Jesus. You might recall, toward the end of his public ministry, right before his passion begins, Jesus takes the disciples out to the Mount of Olives and he gives them this famous sermon where he talks about the future. He talks about what is going to happen after his passion and death, and he prophesies wars, rumors of war, tribulation, strife breaking out, and then ultimately the destruction of Jerusalem and then the end of the world, the passing away of heaven and earth in the final coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven. This is what we would call the second advent, the second coming of Christ. So because it's the Advent season, the Church starts with the very ending of Jesus' Olivet discourse, where Jesus is teaching the disciples, giving them his final prophecy about his second advent, his second coming. This is what the gospel says for the First Sunday of Advent:

Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Watch therefore -- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning -- lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch."¹

That's the end of the Gospel, and significantly that's also the end basically of Jesus' public ministry. It's the last words on his lips before Mark will begin his passion narrative in Mark 14, 15 and 16, which is the end of the Gospel. So Jesus' last words to his disciples, and in a sense to all of us, is watch or keep awake. So let's walk through this gospel text here and just try to break it down. It is a very brief text. That is one of the things you will notice in Year B with the Gospel of Mark is that there will often be some shorter passages, but they are still very rich. In this case there are a couple points we want to make. Number one, just to reiterate, the context of this Gospel reading is Jesus' prophecies about the *parousia*. The Greek word *parousia* is frequently translated as coming, the coming of the Son of Man,

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.

his final coming in glory at the end of human history, at the end of time. So Jesus' words here are really about that prophecy of his final coming. Why does the Church give us that? Again, it's his second advent, it is the same word, the Latin word *adventus*, which means coming. It is a translation of the Greek word *parousia*, that means coming as well. So that's one reason the Church chose this passage. It is because in the Latin translation of the Bible you actually would have the word *adventus* right here. So it is an advent teaching.

Second, Jesus doesn't just speak about his second coming, he gives the disciples a warning; and the warning is that they need to take heed, they need to watch and they need to pray. So the language here of watch literally in Greek is *grēgoreōso* and it means to keep alert or to stay awake. In other words, to be vigilant. So he recognizes that what is going to happen after these moments is that he's going to end up being handed over, arrested, go through his passion and die; and so one of his last admonitions to his disciples is not to lose their sense of vigilance and their sense of expectation for him to return, not to begin to be sluggish and doubtful about whether he's going to come back. He is saying “no, you need to keep awake, you need to watch and you need to pray — to be prayerful in your preparation.” Why? What is the reason to watch and take heed and pray? Well he says because “you do not know when the time will come.” This is one of the standard teachings of Jesus in the Gospel. You see this over and over and over again. In contrast to lots of other prophets and apocalyptic figures who would arise in Judaism, and then also in Christianity throughout the centuries, Jesus does not set a deadline or a date for the end of the world. He doesn't give a timeline. He tells the disciples over and over again that you do not know the day or the hour, you don't know the time when the Son of Man is going to come. It's one of the things I stress over and over again whenever I'm talking about end times teaching, or what theologians call eschatology, the doctrine of the end. Your first clue that someone is not teaching what the Church teaches about the end times is the second they give you a timetable or the second they set a date for it, because our Lord Jesus himself was very clear that no one knows the day or the hour.

In order to illustrate that basic doctrine that we don't know when Christ is going to come back, we know that he will come back but we don't know the hour, Jesus gives here a parable. It's a short parable. It's the parable of the master going on a journey. It is a very brief parable that basically says that the time of the coming of

Christ, of the second Advent, is like a man who goes on a journey. When he leaves home, he puts his servants in charge and each of them has their work to do. He commands the doorkeeper to watch the gate and they have to be on guard because they don't know when the Master is going to come back. So in this parable the master is very clearly here a symbol for Christ himself. So Christ is the master. His disciples are the servants who are going to watch over the house. And one in particular is singled out, which is the doorkeeper. He's commanded to particularly be on the watch. Why? Well because he would be the guard of the house. He's the one who is going to keep thieves from breaking in the house at night. But he would also be the one, as the one manning the gate, who would welcome the master back. So whenever the master comes over the hill and comes into view of his home, it's going to be the gatekeeper who is the first to see him and the first to welcome him home.

So what Jesus is doing here is he's laying out this analogy for the disciples in which they are servants whose master is going to go away, and they don't know how long he's going to be. Which again, think about this in a first century Jewish context. In our day and time, if someone goes on a journey, whether it's by plane or train or automobile, we have ways of communicating with each other about exactly how long we are going to be gone and exactly when we are going to get back. We can text one another, we can call one another, we can read itineraries and schedules; but that's not how travel was in the ancient world. In the ancient world, especially if you were going on a long journey, whether by foot or by boat, all kinds of factors would play into when you got home. In particular, weather. So if you got caught at a port when storms or winter came in early that year, guess what? You are going to spend the winter in that city and you are not going to move again until spring comes and the boats can actually go out and be at sea again safely. We actually see this in the book of Acts for example with the travels of St. Paul. Frequently they will experience delays of up to six months or even a year before they can get back to traveling and reach their desired destination. So that's what traveling was like in the ancient world. When someone left and you wave to them goodbye, you might have a guess as to when they are going to get back, but you don't know for certain. Months and even years could pass.

So what Jesus is saying is that's what my second coming is going to be like. I'm like a master who is going to go away on a journey and you don't know when I'm

going to come back. Now you know that I'll come back, but as for the day or the hour, whether it is going to be in the morning or at night, or as he says here whether it will be at midnight or evening or cockcrow or in the morning — those are basically like the hours of watch. There would be different hours that people would trade off to watch and guard at night, whether it would be evening (like at sunset), or midnight (the middle of the night), cockcrow (which would be early morning but not yet daylight), or the morning itself (dawn). Any one of those hours he might come back and you need to be ready. Although notice that it does suggest that he comes back when? At night. The idea is that he comes at an unexpected time, one that we won't necessarily be ready for, one that we might be inclined to be asleep for. So his exhortation to the disciples is you need to stay awake, “lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.”

Now in the context of Mark's Gospel and Mark's account of Jesus' life, those last two lines, “lest he come suddenly and find you asleep” and “what I say to you I say to all: Watch,” are really evocative because they're going to be repeated in Mark's account of the passion of Christ. In the very next chapter of the Gospel, Mark 14, Jesus is going to celebrate the Last Supper, he is going to go out with the disciples to Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, and there he's going to begin to undergo his agony, he is going to begin to undergo his time of intense prayer and he is going to repeat these admonitions to the apostles: stay awake, pray, lest you enter into temptation. Then he is going to go off and pray by himself to the Father that the cup be taken from him. And what's going to happen when he comes back to the disciples? Well, more than once the Gospel says “he found them sleeping” and he tells them again “stay awake, be vigilant and pray.” So this is a kind of foreboding passage here because in human weakness it's very hard for us to stay in a kind of constant state of vigilance, and we see even the disciples after having heard these words immediately go off with Jesus into the garden of Gethsemane and they fail to pray and they fall asleep. So there's a kind of anticipation of Jesus' passion here in this final words from the Gospel. Alright, that is the Gospel.

What about the first reading? What about the Old Testament readings for this Sunday in Advent? Well in this case, if you go back to the book of Isaiah, the first reading is taken from Isaiah 63-64. Now Isaiah was one of the great prophets of the Old Testament. It is usually dated to around the eighth century BC, and his book is considered one of the major prophets. These two chapters in Isaiah are

extremely significant because they are when the prophet makes a very explicit prayer. He prays for God himself to come down from heaven. So in the context of Israel's suffering, the exile and the scattering of the tribes of the people amongst the Gentile nations, Isaiah the prophet cries out to God and says "we want you to come down from heaven and save us." So these are some of the words for this Sunday's 1st reading. It says this in verses 16 and following:

For thou art our Father,
though Abraham does not know us
and Israel does not acknowledge us;
thou, O LORD, art our Father,
our Redeemer from of old is thy name.
O LORD, why dost thou make us err from thy ways
and harden our heart, so that we fear thee not?
Return for the sake of thy servants,
the tribes of thy heritage.

The lectionary skips down a few verses to Isaiah 64:1 and following. This is what it says:

O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains might quake at thy presence --
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil --
to make thy name known to thy adversaries,
and that the nations might tremble at thy presence!
When thou didst terrible things which we looked not for,
thou camest down, the mountains quaked at thy presence.
From of old no one has heard
or perceived by the ear,
no eye has seen a God besides thee,
who works for those who wait for him.
Thou meetest him that joyfully works righteousness,
those that remember thee in thy ways.
Behold, thou wast angry, and we sinned;
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?

We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one that calls upon thy name,
that bestirs himself to take hold of thee;
for thou hast hid thy face from us,
and hast delivered us into the hand of our iniquities.

This is the climatic verse:

Yet, O LORD, thou art our Father;
we are the clay, and thou art our potter;
we are all the work of thy hand.

We will stop there. What does this have to do with the reading of the Gospel? What is the link here between the Old Testament and the New? I would suggest here that there are two key elements in this passage from Isaiah. First and foremost, the entire oracle of Isaiah, the entire prophecy, is a prayer for the coming of God. He's praying for God not just to save his people or forgive his people or have mercy — all those things are taking place — but the main thrust of the prayer is that you would come down from heaven, that you would tear the heavens and come down and save your people. That is a very powerful prayer because what it anticipates, in a sense, is the mystery of the incarnation, because in a real way the incarnation is God coming down from heaven, not just to be with his people or to strengthen his people, but to save them and to forgive their sins. So the incarnation of Christ, which Advent is going to prepare us for, is an answer to the prayer of Isaiah in Isaiah 63 and 64. Another element about this that's really interesting to me is that if you look at all of the Old Testament, all of the books in the Old Testament that are written in Hebrew, there's only one or two occasions where God is ever explicitly identified as Father using the Hebrew word *av*. And there's only one place in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Hebrew prophets, where a prayer is explicitly addressed to God as our Father, and that is Isaiah 63 and 64. So when Isaiah cries out “our Father” in the context of asking God to come down and save us, he sets a precedent for Christ himself. Because when Christ comes onto the scene, what's going to be the first line of the prayer that he gives to his disciples

when they ask him how to pray? He is going to say “this is how I want you to pray, say Our Father who art in heaven, let thy name be hallowed, let thy kingdom come,” so on and so forth. So the prayer of the Our Father is, in a sense, taking up the language of Isaiah 63 and 64 and making it our own. So this is a very powerful prayer. Basically what Isaiah is doing is tugging on the heartstrings of God and saying look at how we are suffering, look at how we are immersed in sin, we need a Savior and we need you to tear the heavens open and come down to be our Savior. Why? Because you're not just our God, you're not just our Lord, you are our Father. He is calling on the the fatherly identity of God in the context of the covenant, which is what Christ is going to fulfill in the incarnation in a special way.

Then the Psalm for today bridges the gap as usual between the old and the new. The Psalm here is Psalm 80, and basically the refrain is “Lord, let us see your face and we shall be saved.” So for example in Psalm 80:2 it says:

Stir up thy might,
and come to save us!
Restore us, O God;
let thy face shine, that we may be saved!

So why does the Church choose this Psalm for the response today? Well because it's a prayer for salvation. It's a prayer for God to come and save us. Which is again meant for us to help us prepare for the coming of God at Christmas and the salvation that God's going to bring about for us through the incarnation and ultimately through the redemption on the cross and then finally in its consummation at the second coming of Christ at the end of time.

And you can even see this too if you just quickly peek at the second reading for today. So one of the things that I have stressed before but I will say it again is that during Sundays in Ordinary Time, the second reading is on an independent track of a three-year cycle of working through the letters of St. Paul, which is why you'll frequently notice that I hop over it or I don't give as much time to the second reading when I'm walking through Sundays in Ordinary Time. But during the seasons, the special seasons of the year like Lent, Christmas or Advent, the second reading is chosen according to a principle of thematic correspondence. In other words, it will link up with all of the other readings according to some kind of

theme that's appropriate to that particular season. So in this case, the reading is from 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 and I'll just highlight one key verse. In the context of beginning this letter to the Corinthians, Paul says:

...[S]o that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ...

Or literally in the Greek, “as you wait for the revelation” or the “*apokalypsis*” is the Greek word. *Apokalypsis* means unveiling or revelation in Greek, but is also the word from which we get the English apocalypse, like the book of Revelation is sometimes called the Apocalypse. In Greek the title of Revelation is Apokalypsis, so the Church chooses this passage from 1 Corinthians because Paul mentions in it the *apokalypsis* or the revelation of Jesus at the end of time. So it's another way of talking about his *parousia*, about his second coming, about his final advent at the end of time. So in this sense, all four readings together are focused on the coming of God, the salvation of God, the apocalypse of Jesus Christ, and the parousia of the Son of Man in the Gospel, the final advent of Jesus; because that's how we like to begin our liturgical year. We begin the liturgical year, ironically, by looking to the end of time. It is a movement that you might not expect but it makes a lot of sense, because in each liturgical year we want to renew our hope for the second coming of Jesus. This is one of the articles of our faith. We believe that he will “come to judge the living and the dead.” The story of Christ’s encounter in the world is not over yet. He's present in the world now through the Church and the Sacraments, but he will come again in glory and that's where we begin, with that hope for the beginning of Year B.

In closing then I would like to just share with you two last thoughts from the living tradition. One of them is on the difference between the two comings of Christ that we are celebrating during the Advent season. So during the Advent season we are hoping for the second coming and celebrating the first coming, and St. Augustine had this to say about the difference between the first advent of Jesus 2000 years ago and then the final advent of Jesus, which will take place at some day or hour that we don't know. St. Augustine said this:

The first coming of Christ the Lord... was in obscurity; the second will be in the sight of the whole world. When he came in obscurity no one recognized

him but his own servants; when he comes openly he will be known by both good people and bad. When he came in obscurity, it was to be judged; when he comes openly it will be to judge.²

So notice what he is pointing out there. Although the coming of Christ at Christmas and the coming of Christ at the end of time are two comings and they are related mysteries, they are different insofar as one is secret. The Magi get it, the shepherds get it, but everyone else misses it. The last coming of Christ is not going to be obscure. There are not going to be any more debates or doubts about whether he is really the Messiah, whether he is who he claims to be. To the contrary, like Paul says in Philippians 2, at Christ's second coming "every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." During this Advent season that is something to really pray about. What is your understanding, what is my understanding of this the mystery of the second coming? How much of a part of my life do I make it? Do I live as if that's the case? Do I live as if that's true? Do I live in that hope that despite all the evils we see in the world, all the sufferings that we experience, all the sadness we might experience, for example during the holiday season which can be a tough time for people, do I live that season of the year in hope that Christ will come again, not in obscurity but in glory to judge the living and the dead? That's really the message of the Church for this season.

The second quote I want to give you is from the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Now you might recall that the Catechism is the official compendium of all of the Church's teachings on matters of faith and morals. It was published in 1992 by Pope St. John Paul II, and I'll be referring to it over the course of the year. It is a wonderful resource for the official teachings of the Church. This isn't just my opinion, this is the Church's official teachings. And in this case, the Catechism has a short section on Advent that I would encourage you to read and prayerfully ponder. In paragraph 524 of the Catechism this is what the Church teaches:

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

² Augustine, Sermon 18.1; trans. E. Barnecut, p. 10

preparation for the Savior's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming.

That is beautifully put there, "by sharing in the long preparation for the Savior's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming." So that's why the Church begins the liturgical year this way. In a sense, she wants to put us back in the shoes of those first century Jews who were waiting ardently and faithfully for the coming of the Messiah so that we, as Christians who confess Jesus to be the Messiah, can renew our desire for his second advent, for his final coming when he will come to judge the living and the dead, and when everyone will recognize him for the son of God that he is.