

The First Sunday of Advent

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7
<i>Response</i>	Restore us, O God; let thy face shine, that we may 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 thy steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us thy salvation.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 13:33-37

The first Sunday of Advent for year B begins a new cycle in the liturgical life of the Church in which the Church is going to be journeying primarily through the Gospel of Luke [Dr. Pitre meant Mark] with regard to the Gospel readings, but in this series, we're going to be looking at the second readings for year B. And as with year A, they are mostly—not exclusively, but mostly—taken from the writings of St. Paul. So as we begin the season of Advent, the Church starts the liturgical, year mysteriously enough, by beginning at the end, by looking forward to the advent or the coming of Jesus at the end of time.

So, the reading for today, this first Sunday of Advent in year B, is from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians—some of the opening verses to the Church at Corinth. So let's read the second reading, and then we'll ask ourselves: Why did the Church choose this for the first Sunday of Advent? And this is 1 Corinthians 1:3 and following. Paul writes these words:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to

the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.¹

Alright, in context—in its original context—this is basically the opening greeting of Paul’s letters. So if you read through the various letters of Paul, he will often begin with some kind of greeting or thanksgiving, or he’ll say nice words—kind words, words of exhortation and gratitude—to the people to whom he’s writing the letter. He doesn’t always do this. Sometimes if he’s upset, like in the letter to the Galatians, he skips over the thanksgiving. But here, he gives a kind of standard epistolary opening.

And what the Church does is She takes this greeting, this opening, and She gives it to us and reads it to us on the first Sunday of Advent primarily because of the eschatology that’s present in these verses. Eschatology, as I’ve mentioned elsewhere, is just the doctrine of the end times or the doctrine of the last things. The Greek word *eschaton* means “the end” or refers to the last—like the *eschaton* will be the last day.

And in this case, Paul isn’t exactly focused on that, but he uses language of eschatology that is very important for the Church’s understanding of the season of Advent. And the primary word I want to home in on here is in verse 7. So Paul says:

...even as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ...

Now the Greek word there for “revealing” is *apokalypsis...apokalypsis*, from which we get the English word “apocalypse.” Now when I say the word “apocalypse” in English, the ordinary connotation of that word is the cataclysmic end of the world. So if you see a movie called *Apocalypse*, your assumption is going to be that it’s about the end of time; it’s about the end of history; it’s about

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.

the end of the world...and that it's probably about the cataclysmic destruction or disarray that's going to take place as a prelude to the end of the world.

In the New Testament, that's not exactly what the word means. So the denotation, the basic definition of the word *apokalypsis* in Greek is simply "the revelation" or "the unveiling." So you can actually translate this verse:

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

Now what does Paul mean by apocalypse? Well, he means the unveiling, the revelation of Jesus Christ at the end of time. So what he's referring to there is the fact that in the New Testament, what we have is an account—a testimony, as he uses it here—of Jesus' Paschal Mystery. What's the Paschal Mystery? The Passover mystery that He dies on the cross, is buried, is raised bodily from the dead, and then ascends bodily into Heaven, into the realm, the divine realm of where God the Father and the Holy Spirit dwell.

So implicit in that narrative is that Christ reigns right now with His glorified and resurrected body—which He still possesses—but that He's hidden from us. He's invisible. He's reigning invisibly in the Heavenly realm. But at the end of time, the glory of Jesus, which is invisible to those of us on Earth now—we can't see it, we look around, it looks like the world is just like it was before—will be made visible when Christ comes in His advent (His final advent), when Christ comes to raise the dead and to judge humanity on the last day.

So the common word for the second coming of Jesus in the New Testament—the most common word is *parousia* or presence. It's the idea that Christ is, in a sense, visibly absent now as He reigns in Heaven, but He's going to be visibly present in the *parousia*.

But another word that gets used for the second coming in the New Testament is *apokalypsis*—the revelation, the unveiling. You can think of it as the Heavens, so to speak, being parted, and those who are on Earth now being able to see the glory that Christ already possesses but which is invisible to us.

So if you have any doubts about this, you can just look at the beginning of the Apocalypse, which is another name for the book of Revelation. So the word that Paul is using in 1 Corinthians 1 is the same word from which we get the title of the last book of the Bible. So if you turn to Revelation—which, by the way, has no “s” at the end of it. It’s not the book of Revelations; it’s the book of Revelation, singular, the Revelation to John, also known as the Apocalypse. If you look in older translations of the Bible, it will actually—Catholic translations will call this the Apocalypse. And that title comes from the first verse of the book, which says this, Revelation 1:1

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near. (Revelation 1:1-3)

So that first word, the revelation of Jesus Christ, is *apokalypsis*. It’s the same word Paul uses in the reading for today from 1 Corinthians when he says:

...as you wait for the [apocalypse] of our Lord Jesus Christ...

So apocalypse then, is a term that Paul’s using to refer to the second coming. And *that’s* why the Church puts this particular passage on the first Sunday of Advent. Because during the Advent season, the Church turns our attention to two Advents: the first coming of Jesus in the Incarnation, which we celebrate on the feast of Christmas (the feast of the Nativity), and then the second advent of Christ, which will take place at the end of time. But She begins really, with a focus on the second advent. That’s what the Advent season has historically been about—preparing for Christ’s second coming, preparing for His final advent.

And again, if you have any doubts about this, you can turn to 2 Thessalonians, where Paul uses the word again, *apokalypō*, the revealing of Jesus, to describe the

second coming of Jesus. So if you look at 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10, just for a second, see this again how the language is used here. He says this:

...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

So here, what is Paul talking about in 2 Thessalonians 1:7, when he says:

...when the Lord Jesus is revealed...

Well, he's talking about the second coming and the final judgment and the division of humanity. So the Church here, then, is giving us the reading from 1 Corinthians 1:3 and following, because he...it's calling our attention to being prepared—the need to be prepared for the Apocalypse.

Most of us, when we think of Christmas, do not think, “Christmas is the time where we need to be prepared for the Apocalypse.” But that's actually the Church's understanding of the Advent season. And he goes on to say—now that you understand that:

...[Christ] will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:8)

So what day is that? Well, it's not Christmas, the day of Christmas...not Christmas Day. It's the day of judgment; it's the final day. It's the last day. It's the end of time. And as I've mentioned in other videos, the day of the Lord is a standard biblical idiom—it's an expression—from Jewish Scripture to describe the day of judgment, which Paul and other early Christian writers take, and then they transpose that into a new key and use “the day of the Lord” to describe the day of the Lord Jesus Christ coming to judge the living and the dead on the final day of human history.

Alright, so, in closing then, what can we say about this text that the Church gives us, the second reading from 1 Corinthians 1? I think I would just like to say that it's interesting to me, and I think it's significant, that the Church begins by drawing our attention to the end. Because it's very easy in a contemporary, secular context—like in the west, in which I dwell—for...it's ironic that the very same secular west, which is fascinated by apocalyptic movies, post apocalyptic movies...movies about what will happen if all of human society unravels or if the world is polluted and ends up virtually destroyed so that a remnant must emerge from that. Those are very popular themes in contemporary, western, secular literature and art and film.

The same secular society that is fascinated by that idea totally mocks and doesn't believe the idea that the world actually is going to end, that there actually will be a final judgment, that human history and time and space are going to wrap up in the form that we know them when Christ comes to judge the living and the dead. And it's important that we emphasize that that's actually an article of faith for Christianity. If you go back to the earliest forms of the Nicene Creed or the Constantinopolitan Creed or the Apostles Creed, the confession of faith that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead and His kingdom will have no end—we confess that as an article of the Christian faith. It's a non-negotiable. It's one of the divinely revealed articles of faith that has been part of the Christian Kerygma, the Christian proclamation from the beginning.

And yet, I'll never forget one time I was teaching about...teaching on eschatology in a course, and one of the students in the class was a participating...definitely a practicing and faithful Catholic, asked me, "Do you really believe that? Do you really believe in the second coming? Is that actually going to happen?"

And the answer is...if you don't believe that, you really shouldn't say the Creed, because that's what you confess as an article of faith every single time you go to Mass and pray the Creed—or every time you pray the Apostles Creed. So this is not a speculation of the Church; this is an article of the faith of the Church.

Now there's all kinds of speculation about the details of what that will look like, and there's a certain undoubtable mystery to the final advent, about exactly how

it's going to play out and certainly *when*. But this is the essential teaching of the Church. So for example, you don't have to take my word for it. Just look at the *Catechism*. So the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in paragraphs 681 and 682, summarizes the doctrine of the faith when it says this:

On Judgment Day at the end of the world, Christ will come in glory to achieve the definitive triumph of good over evil which, like the wheat and the tares, have grown up together in the course of history. When he comes at the end of time to judge the living and the dead, the glorious Christ will reveal the secret disposition of hearts and will render to each man according to his works and according to his acceptance or refusal of grace.²

So notice, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that the end of the world 1) is going to happen. 2) The end of time will take place. And then 3) when that happens, Christ will judge the living and the dead. So this is the faith. This is the Catholic faith. And this is the teaching of the faith that the Church wants us to begin our year, begin this liturgical year, by focusing on and remembering that time and space as we know it is going to come to an end. So we need to prepare for that final advent as we prepare during the season of Advent.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 681-82