

# The First Sunday of Advent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 2:1-5
<i>Response</i>	Let us go 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 thy steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us thy salvation.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 24:37-44

The second reading for the First Sunday of Advent in Year A comes to us from one of Paul's most famous letters. It's the letter to the Romans. And in this case, the Church has chosen a very special passage from Romans 13. It's toward the end of the letter when Paul is giving a series of moral and spiritual exhortations to his audience, which consist of both Jewish and Gentile Christians in the Church at Rome. And as he's bringing the letter to a close, he says these words to them:

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.<sup>1</sup>

Alright, so two questions here. First, what exactly is Paul saying? What would this have meant in its original context, in the context of the letter to the Romans? And then secondly, why does the Church choose this particular reading for the second reading on the first Sunday of Advent? What meaning does it have for us now as

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

we begin the season of Advent, and we're heading toward Christmas and preparing for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

So let's start with the first point. With regard to its original meaning and its original context, there are several things going on in this passage. Number one: Paul is alluding to the second coming of Jesus Christ. You might not have caught that; he doesn't use the explicit language of the *parousia*, or the coming of Christ, but when he says, in verse 12, that "the night is far gone, the day is at hand," that's actually an allusion to the Biblical expression, "the day of the Lord." It's used in the Old Testament to refer to the day of judgment, like the judgment of a city or of a people...but then it gets used in the New Testament to refer to the day of the final judgment, the day of the judgment of all of humanity, when Christ will return on the clouds as the Son of Man coming in glory to judge the living and the dead.

So Paul here is talking about the imminence of the day of the Lord, the imminence of the *parousia* of Jesus Christ. And so he's telling the congregation here in Rome:

...you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake up from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.

Now, we could go off on a whole lecture just on the whole question of the *parousia* of Jesus, the expectation of His second coming in the early Church. For now, I would just like to highlight two things. First, when you look at the teaching of Paul (and the other apostles) on the second coming of Christ, there are two things that you always want to keep in mind. Number one, the second coming of Christ is near. The second coming of Christ is at hand. They always describe the imminence of Jesus' second coming. That's exactly what Paul means here when he says "the day is at hand." The Greek word there is *eggizō*. It means "at hand," approaching, coming soon...it has all of those connotations. It's the same word Jesus actually uses in the Gospel of Mark 1, when he says "repent, the kingdom of Heaven"—or "the kingdom of God is at hand." *Eggizō*...it's near, it's approaching.

So Paul will frequently talk about the nearness of Jesus' second coming, but at the same time, the second doctrine that he will also affirm is our ignorance of the exact timing of the second coming. Remember this in the Gospel, Jesus Himself says,

“No one knows the day or hour.” And he’ll frequently give parables about the delay of the master, how the master goes away and he’s coming back soon. But the servants think he’s delayed, so some of them start to be abusive towards others, and then the master will show up at “an hour they do not expect.” So both those aspects are part of the apostolic preaching of Christ’s second coming. Imminence and ignorance—it’s coming soon, but we don’t know exactly when.

And what’s fascinating here is that Paul’s taking that idea of the imminence of Jesus Christ, and he’s using it to exhort the Roman Christians to wake up and to get ready, because “the day is at hand.” So the metaphor’s working on two levels—the day of Jesus Christ is at hand, and also like the dawn is at hand. And what do we do when dawn comes around? Well, we wake up; we rise from sleep.

And it’s fascinating that this exact same imagery is used elsewhere in Paul. So, just as a quick aside, if you look at 1 Thessalonians 5, there’s a kind of parallel confirmation. In chapter 5:1-11, Paul says something very similar to the passage we just read. Listen to this:

But as to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But, since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Alright, it's kind of a long passage, but notice the parallels there between this passage and Romans 13. First, Paul's talking about the second coming. Second, he uses the image of the "day of the Lord" to describe it. Third, and this is important, although he emphasizes that it's near (in Romans 13), here he's emphasizing that it's also unexpected. We don't know when it's going to be. So he uses two analogies of that—our ignorance of the hour of the end. One is of the thief in the night, and the other is of a woman giving birth. So take the second one first.

I'm a father of five children, so I've kind of been through this process before. And although you know that the child is coming soon, you really don't know exactly when that's going to be. And although in modern times, we've set up these mythological things called due dates, everyone who's actually had a baby knows that they're meaningless. They should have a due month or something like that, like the baby will come in October. When will it be born? I don't know. Sometime in this month, or maybe not—especially in antiquity, too. We didn't have hospitals and the ability to monitor pregnancies. You didn't know exactly when the baby was coming, right? Childbirth could come on very suddenly and often very tragically.

So Paul uses that imagery and the image of a thief in the night, which no one is ready for when a thief comes to their house. You never know when a thief is going to break in. He uses those images to describe the second coming of Christ, the day of the Lord. We know it's coming, but we don't know exactly when it's going to happen. And therefore, we need to be prepared and live as sons of light and of the day, rather than people of darkness. So we need to be prepared for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. So the image of light and darkness and of the day of the Lord, that's all behind Paul's words that are somewhat more brief here in Romans 13.

So if you take that back to Romans 13, what Paul is saying to the Roman Christians is: be ready for the coming of Christ, because it's near. The day is at hand. So how do we prepare for it? What then do we do? Paul gives two exhortations: a positive one and a negative one. The negative one is "cast off the works of darkness." And the positive one is "put on the armor of light."

Now, these metaphors here—although it’s harder to see it in English, in the Greek it’s much clearer—these are clothing metaphors. So he’s describing works of darkness as if they are a garment that a person takes off, like their nightclothes. And the armor of light is a metaphor for clothing that someone puts on in the morning. So just think about it on a natural level. When you get up in the morning, what is one of the first things you do? You take off your nightclothes, and you put on the clothing for the day. So here Paul is using that common human experience to exhort the Roman Christians to get ready for the day of Christ by putting off works of darkness and putting on this armor (or this clothing) that’s made of light. So exactly what does each of those images mean?

Let’s start with the negative one, because that’s where Paul starts first. The works of darkness for Paul basically is a metaphor for various sins that as Christians, the Romans need to have left behind. They need to no longer engage in. So here Paul gives a list. So...I’m laughing as I say that, because whenever I’m teaching as a professor frequently, when I bring up mortal sins, students will often say, “Well, could you give us a list? We need a list to know exactly what they are.” Well, here is one of Paul’s lists; he gives several. But he says this, as for works of darkness, we are to conduct ourselves as in the day and not in (number one) reveling.

The Greek word here is *kômos*. It can be translated as “orgies.” It’s actually one of the names for a Greek god associated with Dionysius, who was the god of wine and revelry. So sexual immorality and drunkenness were associated with this god, and presumably some of the pagans to whom Paul is writing—who are converts to Christianity—would be familiar with that kind of activity from their life as pagans. So he’s saying you have to cast that off. No reveling, no *kômos*.

Second, closely related...drunkenness. The Greek word here is *methē*, and it just means to get drunk, to be intoxicated through the consumption of wine. Third, debauchery or promiscuity. The Greek word here is *koitê*, it’s the word for “bed.” So in other words, any kind of illicit activity that takes place in the bed has no place in the life of a Christian. Number four, licentiousness or lust. The Greek word here, *aselgeia*, it literally means “sexual excesses,” but it refers kind of to sexual perversions or perverse sexual activity.

Next, he mentions quarreling. The Greek word here just means quarreling. It means fighting or infighting. It can sometimes be translated as “rivalry.” And then finally, jealousy, which in this case the Greek word is interesting. It’s *zēlos*, from which we get the English word “zeal,” but it has a negative connotation. It doesn’t mean zeal like I’m committed to something. It means a kind of zeal that is blinding and leads people to be divisive and to quarreling, and it leads to the setting up of factions. So you can kind of think of the Zealots, which were an early Jewish movement. They were called the Zealots, because they were zealous for the law, but they were so zealous that they wanted to murder Romans. Some of them would assassinate various Romans. They were called the Sicarii. They would stab them in crowds, and their zeal led them to violence and to divisions. That’s the kind of jealousy or zeal Paul’s talking about here—a jealousy that leads to quarreling and divisiveness and to factions.

So this list of the works of darkness—as Paul describes them—is essentially a list of sins or a list of vices which need to be taken very seriously, because for Paul they have no place in the life of a Christian. You can actually see this because he mentions some of them elsewhere in the letter to the Galatians, where he gives another one of his lists of vices. In this case, though, he doesn’t call them works of darkness, he calls them works of the flesh. I’ll come back to the flesh in just a second, what that means. But in Galatians 5:19, Paul says:

Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

So notice, Paul is writing to believers here, but he’s telling them, look, if you engage in sexual immorality or enmity and strife, if you stir up factions within the Church, if you engage in drunkenness and carousing, you will not inherit the kingdom of God. In other words, for Paul, the works of darkness are what we call mortal sins. They’re the kind of activities that will exclude us from the kingdom of God, and therefore, they have no place in the life of a Christian.

This is really important to stress. I've said this before but I'll say it again, because I've noticed that in contemporary Catholic circles, you'll sometimes hear drunkenness—well, actually, not just sometimes...too frequently, drunkenness is treated as if it's completely acceptable. You'll see it treated almost as if it's like part of Catholic culture. "Drunkenness...it's not a big deal." No, that's wrong, okay. According to the Bible of the Catholic Church, voluntary and intentional drunkenness is a mortal sin. It is the kind of activity that belongs to the works of darkness, and if someone voluntarily and deliberately gets drunk and they engage in drunkenness and carousing and revelry, according to St. Paul, they are not going to inherit the kingdom of God. So this is a very grave sin. This is a very serious sin, because it's a voluntary abandonment of your use of reason. And as anyone who's ever been drunk knows, precisely because once you lose your ability to reason and make good judgments, frequently what follows are other sins that a person would not commit if they had their right mind about them. So drunkenness leads to other sins. It's not a coincidence that Paul couples it here with things like reveling and sexual immorality and other sins: quarreling, anger, strife. Those things all flow out of the loss of reason.

So what Paul is saying here is, "Look, Jesus is coming back. The day of the Lord is at hand. Put off works of darkness that belong to your previous life, before you came to faith in Christ—maybe when you were a pagan you did such things. But now put on new clothing." Just like in the morning, you put on a new piece of clothing, so too now, you need to put on the "armor of light." So what is this armor of light that Paul is talking about here? Kind of a bizarre image there, armor of light. Well, Paul actually identifies it. Obviously in context, he means certain virtues in contrast to these vices. But here, in verse 14, he says something interesting. He says:

...put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh...

Now hold on. I thought Jesus was a person, not a garment. Why does Paul—he's going to mix his metaphors throughout his letters, it's fascinating how he'll do this. He'll frequently use things in very strange ways. Why does Paul speak about putting on Christ as if Christ were a garment? Well, again, it's helpful to look at a parallel passage in another of Paul's letters. This one's from the letter to the

Colossians 3:9. And although there's some debate about Pauline authorship of Colossians, we're not going to go into that in these videos; we're not going to get into the details of authorship. The Church in the lectionary ascribes all of the traditional letters attributed to St. Paul (with the exception of Hebrews) to Paul. So reading from St. Paul to the Colossians. So that's how I'm going to treat it in these videos, and I'll deal with questions of authorship and things like that in some other forum.

In this case, in the letter to the Colossians 3:9, we read these words. Here Paul is exhorting the Colossians to avoid sins, and listen to what he says. Actually, we can back up to verse 7. Colossians 3:7:

In these you once walked, when you lived in them. But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

That's fascinating. Some translations actually have here, a little more literally, "put off the old man and put on the new man." Now who is the old man and who is the new man? Well, the old man is Adam, the one who brought sin and death into the world. And the new man is Christ, the new Adam. So Paul's describing here, this is another example of him using the image of a person and mixing it with the metaphor of a garment. Now you might think, why would Paul do something like that? It's bizarre. But the answer actually lies in Judaism.

If you look at ancient Jewish traditions about the fall of the Adam and Eve, like in the book called *The Life of Adam and Eve* and other ancient writings, you'll see that in Jewish tradition, when the fall took place, there was actually a garment involved. What Jewish writings will say is before the fall, Adam and Eve are clothed in garments of light. Actually, they're sometimes called the garments of glory, and when they commit their first sin, they're stripped of those garments of glory. They're stripped of these garments made of light. In other words, they're stripped of their righteousness that they had before they sinned. So the expectation was that when the Messiah came and the New Creation came back, the garments of



glory that Adam and Eve had lost would be restored to humanity, that we'd be able to put on, once again, the garments of light and the garments of glory.

So Paul here is using this metaphor—old man, new man, and clothing—as an echo of the fall of Adam and Eve, and of Christ as the new Adam, who is going to clothe those who belong to His body in His own virtues, in His own glory, in His own righteousness. He's going to clothe us in His righteousness. So if you take that image and you go back to Romans 13, now all of a sudden it makes sense. Paul is saying, “Put off the works of darkness,” which is like the clothing of sin, and “put on a garment of light given to you by Christ”—with one key shift. Notice, it's not just a garment of light, it's the armor of light that he wants us to put on.

Now what does that mean? Well, armor is clothing, but it's the kind of clothing you wear when you go into battle. So in this case, Paul is presupposing that the Roman Christians are being called to spiritual battle. It's the battle against the darkness and the sin of this world—and the battle against our own inclinations to sin that we all experience within our hearts and in our minds. So Paul here is saying, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. He is your clothing; He is your garment.” And I can't help but think about how powerful this is if you really ponder the way Paul is imagining what it means to be a Christian. A Christian isn't just somebody who believes Jesus, believes in Jesus, listens to Jesus. A Christian should be an icon, a kind of living icon of Jesus. He should wear Jesus as his clothing. He should put on the armor of light, which is Christ Jesus Himself. This is a very mystical way of approaching our moral life. Christ, as Paul will say elsewhere:

...it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me...

His virtues, his righteousness becomes my righteousness, and so I have to live accordingly, according to Jesus Christ.

Finally, the last statement Paul makes there:

...put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

What does that mean, the flesh? Well sometimes when people read Paul's statements about the flesh, they think he means just the body per se. But it's a little more precise than that. For Paul, the body is good. He goes around proclaiming the Resurrection of the body. *Sōma* is the Greek word. But when he talks about the flesh, *sarx* in Greek, what he's referring to is this fallen human nature, which of course includes your body, but it's emphasizing our bodies in its fallen state, in which we're inclined to sin. We're inclined to the darkness rather than to the light.

And so what Paul is saying here is don't gratify the desires—in Greek, *epithymia*, literally “the lusts”—of the flesh, these disordered inclinations and desires of our flesh. But instead, cover them, conquer them, with the armor of light, which is Jesus Christ Himself. So, powerful, beautiful image there of how we can prepare for the second coming of Christ at the end of time, but also how we can prepare for the celebration of the first advent of Christ in this Christmas season.

And in order to see how that works, let me close with two quotes from the living tradition. First, this one's from St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas Aquinas lived in the 13th century, and we're very grateful that he wrote a commentary on all of the letters of St. Paul. And I'll be quoting from these pretty frequently throughout these videos as I work through the letters of Paul. And in his commentary on Romans 13, the passage for today, I was really surprised to find that St. Thomas explicitly says that this very passage was being read during Advent in the 13th century. And here is what he has to say about its meaning:

[I]nasmuch as the Church reads these words during Advent, they seem to refer to the salvation which Christ worked during his first coming. Accordingly, we can understand the Apostle speaking in place of all believers since the beginning of the world.

They can also be taken to refer to the time of mercy, when one begins willing to depart from past sins. For at that time he is closer to his salvation than previously, when he had a dead faith...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, no. 1065; trans. F. R. Larcher; cf. no 1075; CCC 1852; on drunkenness as “mortal sin”; trans. F. R. Larcher

So if you look, in other words, you can refer to the salvation that is nearer to us, both in terms of the advent of Christ—whether it’s His first advent at Christmas or His final advent at the end of time—or you can refer to it on an individual level. And the fact of the matter is, that whether Jesus comes in two years or two thousand years for the cosmic judgment (the general judgment), when it comes to me and you, our particular judgment is going to be sooner rather than later. He is coming soon to judge us. And so it’s crucial that we be prepared, that we be ready to encounter Christ. And that’s really what the Advent season is about, helping us prepare for the coming of Christ, the second coming of Christ, by going back and recalling and celebrating and preparing for the first advent of Christ at Christmas.

In closing, the last quote here from the tradition is a bit more practical. So how can I live out Romans 13 in my daily life? Like what can I do to put on the armor of Jesus Christ, to put on the armor of light in my own personal life? And in this case, I would say that Paul’s metaphor can be applied really directly to our own daily life. Mainly this: just like every day you get up and the first thing you do is take off your pajamas and put on your clothing for the day, so too, every morning you should get up and put on the armor of light. Put on the light of Christ in daily prayer, in morning prayer—spending time in meditation every single day.

You don’t have to take my word for it. You can just listen to the words of St. Francis de Sales. He talks about the importance in the Christian life of getting up early and putting on Christ by praying. And he uses the imagery here of light to do so. Listen to this:

Since prayer places our intellect in the brilliance of God’s light and exposes our will to the warmth of his heavenly love, nothing else so effectively purifies our intellect of ignorance and our will of depraved affection... I especially counsel you to practice mental prayer, the prayer of the heart, and particularly that which centers on the life and passion of our Lord. By often turning your eyes to him in meditation, your whole soul will be filled with him. You will learn his ways and form your actions after the pattern of him. He is “the light of the world”... Set aside an hour every day

before dinner, if possible early in the morning, when your mind is less distracted and fresher after the night's rest.<sup>3</sup>

That's from St. Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*, book 2, paragraph 1. And St. Francis is laying out a basic principle there of the necessity of getting up each day and beginning one's day with prayer, especially meditation on the life of Christ. That's how we put on Christ every single day. We read about Him, we pray about Him, we meditate on His life and His virtues, and therefore we can grow to imitate Him as we get closer and closer to Him. And we begin our day, not just with the natural light of dawn, but with the supernatural light of Scripture and its witness to Jesus.

And for my money at least, that's a really powerful challenge to all of us. How do we live our daily life? What's the first thing you do in the morning? If the first thing you do in the morning is to pray, is to encounter Jesus in Scripture and to put on His life, to put on His light, through reading the Word of God and meditating on Him, then you are in fact going to grow to be closer to Him. It's going to determine, it's going to affect the way you live the rest of your day.

And it's not just a nice spiritual exhortation by the way, too. Because notice, Paul said to put on the armor of light, and the reality is we are engaged in a spiritual battle. Today, this day, you're going to encounter temptations. You're going to encounter tribulations. You're going to encounter trials, and you need to have put on the armor of the light of Christ in order to engage in that spiritual battle.

I'll never forget...I was reading recently the firsthand account by Bernal Díaz of the conquest of the Aztecs under Hernan Cortes. And Díaz was a soldier in Cortes' army, and he said that because they were always under a threat of attack from the Aztecs, they would sleep in their armor every night. So he got used to sleeping in his armor, and I couldn't help but think about that as I read Paul's passage here. Because someone who sleeps in their armor is ready for battle. And so Paul here, when he tells us in the morning the first thing we should do is put on our armor, is helping us to realize that the reason the light had to come into the world for

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<sup>3</sup> Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 2.1; trans. J. K. Ryan

Christmas is because that the world was shrouded in darkness and that there really is a battle out there between the darkness and the light. And what Christmas tells us is that the light has prevailed and the darkness has not overcome it. So as we head toward the celebration of the light of the world coming into the world, let us remember Paul's exhortation to us in this Advent season: Put off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.