

The First Sunday of Advent

(Year C)

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| <i>First Reading</i> | Jeremiah 33:14-16 |
| <i>Response</i> | To thee, O Lord, I lift up my soul. |
| <i>Psalm</i> | Psalm 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14 |
| <i>Second Reading</i> | 1 Thessalonians 3:12—4:2 |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | Show us thy steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us thy salvation. |
| <i>Gospel</i> | Mark 13:24-32 |

The first Sunday of Advent for year C begins our journey in a new liturgical year with the series of second readings with a quotation from what is regarded by many people as the earliest of all Paul's letters, the first letter to the Thessalonians 3:12 and following.

And if you know anything about 1 Thessalonians, you'll know that a lot of this letter is focused on the final advent of Jesus — what we would call the second coming, or in Greek, the *parousia*. So it's fitting that this would be one of the first readings we encounter for the new liturgical year during the Advent season. Let's see what it has to say in 1 Thessalonians 3:12 - 4:2, and I'm quoting here:

...and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men, as we do to you, so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Finally, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.¹

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.

Alright, now the lectionary stops there. I'm going to do something I don't usually do here. I want to keep going a couple more verses here, just because — as you can maybe tell even from the tone of that last sentence — here the lectionary ends on an introductory tone. What was taking place in that last verse:

... what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

... is what Paul is about to say, not what he just has said. So if we just go two more verses here — two or three more verses — it'll give you the context and it'll help me unpack the meaning of the reading today. So Paul continues:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity; that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you. For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness.

Okay, that was a little more than two verses, but it's very, very important. So let me back up; we'll kind of walk through here, make a few points about the reading for today.

First, the first thing you want to notice here is ... notice in the opening verses that when Paul is exhorting his audience, he speaks about the fact that they can increase in love. This is very important — the idea that after Baptism, after coming to faith, the Thessalonians can increase in charity, that charity can grow, that salvation is a process. That's point number one.

Point number two — that the purpose of justification or salvation that Paul talks about so frequently is so that:

... he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness...

So the Greek word here for holiness, *hagiosynē*, comes from the word in Greek *hagios*. It means the same thing as the Hebrew word for holy — means to be set apart. And it has the same connotations that the Hebrew word has — set apart from sin and set apart for God. It's both of those things.

So in context, what Paul is saying is that the Thessalonians' hearts need to be established unblamable in holiness — why? In preparation for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Greek word there for “coming” is *parousia*. You'll sometimes hear people about the *parousia* of Jesus. That's a reference to the second coming.

Sometimes people will say the pooh-roo-schuh — that's not quite the correct pronunciation. But the Latin translation is *adventus*, and here you see the link. Why in the Roman Church do we take 1 Thessalonians 3 and read it on the first Sunday of Advent? It's because Paul is exhorting his readers to grow in charity and to prepare themselves to be found blameless in holiness at the advent of Jesus Christ, at the *parousia* of Jesus Christ.

And so he continues to exhort them and beseech them and saying that the way they're going to do this is to follow what he taught them about how to live and how to please God and to keep doing that more and more so that they might grow in holiness.

So remember here, when Paul is writing to the Thessalonians, the Thessalonians are a young congregation of pagans who have become Christians through Paul's apostolic ministry and evangelization of them. Thessalonica is a thoroughly Greek city, so the people to whom this letter is addressed — like many of Paul's letters — are pagans. They've lived the lives among the Gentiles, following Gentile customs, following Gentile morality. And they have some questions for Paul about how to get ready for the second coming and what's going to happen at the second coming.

And in this section of the reading for today, Paul is telling them: the way to prepare for the second coming of Christ, the final advent, is to grow in charity, to seek after holiness, and to live according to the instructions that we gave you through the Lord Jesus. So here Paul is alluding to the fact that he's already visited the

congregation, he likely founded the congregation, but he's no longer with them. So he's reminding them of the initial instructions that he gave to them when he had first evangelized them in the city of Thessalonica.

Now, unfortunately, the lectionary stops there, so you don't actually get the content, the kind of details of what those instructions were and how the Thessalonians might follow them. So that's why I read the next few verses, because in those verses, Paul says a couple things that are really important. He says:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification...

He's saying the reason I even came to you, the reason you heard the Gospel, is because God wants you to be sanctified. God wants you to be holy, to be set apart from sin and set apart for Him. So, what's the first step on the road to sanctification? According to St. Paul:

... that you abstain from unchastity ...

And the Greek word there is *porneia*. You'll see translations often translate this as unchastity or sexual immorality. And the reason that's important to highlight is because for converts from paganism, beginning to live a life of morality that follows the standards of Judaism and the standards of the Old Testament is going to be one of the more difficult transitions they have to make, and it's going to be one of the first steps on the path to holiness for them. To be holy means to be set apart from sin, especially the sin of *porneia*, of unchastity.

That's why Paul goes on to say that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness, that the body is sacred, that the body should be set apart from sin and set apart for God... or in the case of married couples, that a husband and wife's bodies are set apart for one another and not for anyone else.

So he contrasts that with the passion of lust, like the heathen who don't know God. Now what's fascinating about this point is that when he uses the word heathen, it's just the word for Gentile. But he's writing to Gentiles in 1 Thessalonians. But he

treats them as if they're no longer Gentiles, because now they belong to Christ. They're no longer pagans, even though they're ethnically Gentile. Now the challenge becomes living not according to Gentile culture and Gentile morality, but according to holiness, the universal call to holiness — which remember, is something that God made to the Jews, first and foremost... or to the people of Israel, the twelve tribes in Exodus 19, where He calls them to be a kingdom of priests and a *holy* nation.

So I bring that up because in context, the reading for today in the lectionary is very powerful and also very consequential. Paul is telling the Thessalonians, “You need to get ready for advent” — not the season of Advent like we celebrate but for the final advent, for the second advent. And the way you get ready for the second advent is to grow in charity and to walk in holiness. And the first step on the path of holiness in a Gentile culture, in a pagan culture, in a culture saturated with sexual immorality — the first step is to live a life of chastity, to avoid *porneia*, to avoid unchastity, and to seek after holiness.

I think this is a powerful passage for a couple reasons. First, sometimes in the modern era, when we think about holiness or the pursuit of holiness, we tend to think about it in very individualistic terms, like “So why should I strive for holiness.” Well, because I want to live... you'll sometimes hear people say, “Live your best life now. Be the best version of yourself” — or something like that. It's kind of drawing on the language of modern self-help terminology.

And that is true, in the sense that holiness does help us to improve. It helps us to become more conformed to Christ and what God made us to be, so there's a personal dimension to holiness and the pursuit of holiness. It's important, but it's not limited to that. There's also an eschatological reason to seek holiness, and it's this: Christ is coming soon, and you need to be ready to meet Him. You need to prepare yourself to encounter Him. You need to, as St. Paul says, have your heart established so that you might be unblamable in holiness for our God and Father at the *parousia* of Jesus Christ.

So one of the reasons Advent is a penitential season is because the Church (following St. Paul) wants to teach us to put away sin and prepare to meet Christ.

So every season of Advent is a kind of mini dress rehearsal for the final advent of Christ, for the second coming of Christ... which again, even if you don't live to the second coming, you're going to encounter Christ in your own particular judgment. So the Advent season helps us look ahead, helps us look to the *eschaton*, to the end, to prepare for that.

And if you're living in a Gentile culture or pagan culture (like many of us are), one of the things — specific, concrete steps we have to take on that path to holiness is to abstain from immorality and learn the virtue of self-control, especially with regard to the sanctity and the holiness of the body.

So I don't usually link Advent with the Theology of the Body, but Paul does in 1 Thessalonians 3 and 4, and I think that's a fascinating and also a very instructive message for us today, who may be ethnically Gentile but sacramentally Christians... but who live in a culture that is a heathen culture and that doesn't operate according to the principles of morality as given to us in Scripture. One of the things to do during the Advent season is to call to mind Paul's exhortation to holiness and to charity.

So in closing, in terms of the living tradition, I'm going to quote this over and over again, and too bad if you don't like it — I can't help myself. But it has to do with the universal call to holiness that was taught by the Second Vatican Council and continues to be emphasized by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Sometimes people will give the impression that Vatican II's teaching on the universal call to holiness is a kind of novelty or an innovation, but it's not. It goes all the way back to, arguably, the earliest apostolic letter in the New Testament, and that's the letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians 3. So in Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 11 says this:

Strengthened by so many and such great means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state—though each in his own way—are called by the Lord to that *perfection of sanctity* by which the Father himself is perfect.²

² Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11

And then again, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 2013:

“All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity.” *All are called to holiness*: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”³

So notice there, the two quotes, Vatican II and the *Catechism*, making it clear that it’s not just a universal call to holiness; it’s a universal call to charity. And we see both of those vocations, both of those calls, in the first reading for the first Sunday of year C for Advent, from St. Paul to the Thessalonians.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* par 2013, quoting Matt 5:48