

The First Sunday of Advent

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 33:14-16
<i>Response</i>	To you, O Lord, I lift 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, Lord, your love; and grant us your salvation.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

Although the secular year begins with January 1st, every year the liturgical year starts with the First Sunday of Advent, a four week long season that prepares us to celebrate the Feast of Christmas. And so we're beginning that new liturgical year today with the Gospel of Luke which is read throughout Year C. So over the course of these four weeks in Advent we're going to be reading through the Gospel of Luke, we'll be starting a new cycle of gospel readings, but we'll also be preparing ourselves to celebrate the Feast of Christmas. Now if you're like me, the season of Advent is both one of the busiest seasons of the liturgical year but it's also one of my favorites, because it's filled with parties and all kinds of joyful celebrations of family gatherings where we are getting together and anticipating the coming of Christ at Christmas. So you might be a little surprised when you think of Christmas lights and those kind of things to read the gospel for this Sunday which doesn't have anything to do with any of that, but which, rather is about the tribulation, the second coming, and the final judgment.

So why does the church start with a prophecy of Jesus about his coming at the end of time, about the final judgment? Well the reason is this: is that the Advent season comes from the Latin word *adventus* which is a translation of the Greek word *parousia*, right, which means coming. And it is about the coming of Christ not just in time and space at Christmas, at the first Christmas in his birth, but also about his second coming, his second advent, at the end of time. So Advent is an interesting season because there's a kind of duality to it. It's focused on two comings: the first

coming of Jesus at Christmas and then the second coming of Jesus at the end of time. So the church begins the liturgical year by quoting from the gospel prophecy in which Jesus goes on to the Mount of Olives and talks about his final coming, his final *parousia*, his final advent at the end of time. And that's where we're going to begin today. So because it is Year C we're going to turn to the Gospel of Luke, the Olivet Discourse in Luke 21:25-28 and 34-36. Again the church here has broken up the Olivet Discourse and just given us a couple of snippets, a couple of short verses, taken somewhat out of context. But, we'll read through them and I'll try to help you understand what they mean and what they signify for our celebration of Advent. So here's how we begin the liturgical year on this happy note. Luke 21:25:

And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

Then it skips down to verse 34:

But take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare; for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole earth. But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man.¹

Alright kids, let's get ready for Christmas, right. This is a bit of a strange way to start the liturgical year, it's pretty ominous, right. This prophecy of the coming of the Son of Man, of great terror and distress, cosmic upheaval, and also a warning

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.

against dissipation and drunkenness and anxiety. So what are we to make of this? Let's walk through it together.

First and foremost, here the church is taking Jesus' prophecy on the Mount of Olives about the coming of the Son of Man, which if I had more time I could show you, can refer to both the destruction of Jerusalem but also to his final coming at the end of time. In this case the church is clearly applying it to the end of time, his final advent at what we call the second coming. And it's talking about the cosmic upheaval that will accompany the *parousia* of the Son of Man, right, his final advent, in Latin his *adventus*. And what it's saying here is when you see the Son of Man coming with power and great glory lift up your heads, look up, because your redemption is drawing near. Now if you were a First Century Jew and you were hearing these words about the Son of Man coming on a cloud with glory, what you would immediately think of is an Old Testament prophecy that we've seen more than once used in the lectionary. And that's the prophecy from Daniel 7:13-14 of the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven to receive the heavenly everlasting eternal kingdom of God, right. So in this case what Jesus is doing is taking that prophecy from the Book of Daniel and applying it to himself. He is the Son of Man who is going to come in great power and glory to receive the everlasting kingdom of God. But in this context what the church does is it takes this prophecy of the Son of Man and then it skips right down to verses 34-36, which is really the main thrust of this gospel text which is the exhortation to "be ready." The warning against not being prepared for the coming of the Son of Man and for the final judgment.

So notice Jesus' words here and these are distinctive to the Gospel of Luke, so I want to focus on them. We've seen him talk about the coming of the Son of Man in the Gospel of Matthew and in the Gospel of Mark, but in the Gospel of Luke there are a couple verses here that are pretty unique, somewhat distinctive, and so I want to highlight them. So what does Jesus say? Ultimately what we need to do is to be prepared for that final judgment, to be prepared for that final advent, to be prepared for the second coming. So how do we do that? Well he gives us a few instructions here. Number one, we need to take heed to ourselves. In other words, we need to be prepared lest our hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the cares of this life. So what is he talking about here? Well dissipation and drunkenness here are pretty obvious. The word dissipation in Greek — *kraipalē* —

literally means a kind of unbridled indulgence. So just indulging in all of the pleasures of the flesh, you know, money, pleasure and power. All the things of this world that it's so easy for us to be tempted to fall in love with. So we need to guard our hearts about falling into an unbridled indulgence in the things of this world.

Second, he singles out drunkenness in particular as something to be avoided. Well why, what's the problem? Well if you look elsewhere in the New Testament, although many Catholics for whatever reason don't seem to be aware of this fact, in 1 Corinthians 6 it's very clear that drunkenness, deliberate inebriation, is a mortal sin. 1 Corinthians 6 Paul says drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of God. He lists a number of other things as well, thieves, and prostitution and things like that, but drunkenness is a grave sin. And it's also here very symbolic of a person who has given themselves so much over to the pleasures of this world that they've lost the control of their reason, right. They've lost the control of their faculties. That's one of the reasons it's gravely sinful — is because when you get drunk you can no longer control your reason and your will and therefore you can do things that are irrational and therefore sinful. All sin is ultimately irrational. So drunkenness is willingly entering into a state of irrationality where our actions can be beneath our dignity, we can be abusive to others or to ourselves.

So Jesus says don't fall into drunkenness, don't fall into dissipation, but, and a third thing he says, don't give into anxiety either. The Greek word here — *merimna* — literally talks about the cares of this life, just the anxieties of this world. Jesus uses it in the parable of the sower earlier in the Gospel of Luke when he talks about the seed that gets planted in the thorns, amongst the thorns, and the thorns choke it. What he says is the thorns symbolize the anxieties, the cares of this life. So that's really important because he's not talking here about some mortal sin. He's not saying, you know, don't become a terrorist or a murderer. He's saying don't allow the anxieties of this world to take over, to squelch or to smother the seed of the gospel that's been planted in your heart. Don't let your heart be weighed down by anxiety.

So that's a really important warning here. There are two things that can take us away from being prepared for God. One is outright sin but the other is an over anxiety for the cares and the things of this world; being too focused on the realities of this world and not focused enough on the kingdom that is to come, right.

Because he says ultimately that the day will come upon you suddenly like a snare and it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole earth. This is a clear indication here that Jesus in these verses is no longer talking about just the local destruction of Jerusalem that he's been talking about earlier in the Olivet Discourse in Luke 21. This is a clear reference to the final judgment because it's going to come upon everyone; it's going to be a universal judgment. And you'll see this over and over again in the prophets when they use the expression "that day" or "the day," it's always the day of judgment. And in the Old Testament that can sometimes be localized judgment, like the judgment of Jerusalem or the judgment of Egypt or the judgment of Sodom, but here Jesus is talking about the day meaning the final day, meaning the day of judgment that will come upon the whole world. And just as we see elsewhere in the gospels, although Jesus gives a timeline for the destruction of Jerusalem within one generation, he never gives a date for the final judgment. That day or hour is not known. So you need to be ready for the final judgment lest it come upon you like a snare or a trap.

So what do we do? How do we get ready for the final judgment? Verse 36 says watch at all times and pray. Now those two words watch and pray are basically standard images for keeping vigil. One of the things that the Jews would often do, especially on Passover, is that they would stay up late into the night and they would pray, so praying deep into the night. One of the reasons they did that is because there was a Jewish tradition that when the Messiah would come he would come on the night of Passover. So in order to be ready for the Messiah to come at Passover you needed to stay awake on Passover night. And you didn't just need to stay awake, you needed to pray so that you would be ready and in a state of righteousness and holiness when the Messiah finally came. So Jesus is taking those Jewish ideas of being ready for the coming of the Messiah but he's applying them to his final advent, to his final judgment. That we need to watch to keep vigil and to pray so that we will be ready for the day of judgment and for the coming of the Son of Man.

Just as a side note here, just might want to bring this up. People, Christians, today I've noticed for the most part we're familiar with the spiritual discipline of fasting, right. So fasting is the idea of going without food in order to detach ourselves from the pleasures of the world and attach ourselves more closely to the things of God: prayer, meditation, the reading of Scripture, those kind of things. Somewhat less

well-known is the parallel spiritual discipline of vigils or fasting from sleep, right, staying awake when you're tired and praying as a way of detaching ourselves from the pleasure of sleep — and sleep is pleasurable, right; it's restful; it's restorative. But we detach ourselves from that, we give up sleep in order to stay awake and pray, we keep vigil. This is something in the monastic tradition that's very much part of monastic life. Rising in the middle of the night in order to say certain prayers for example; giving up sleep willingly as a kind of penance, right, an act of sacrifice. If you're a Catholic parent with lots of young kids you don't need to do this voluntarily because it will be done to you involuntarily when your kids wake up multiple times throughout the night. But if you don't have young kids, which obviously the monks didn't, one of the ways they would detach themselves from the pleasure of sleep would be to keep vigil. So here Jesus is drawing on that practice of being vigilant, being awake, and praying as a way of preparing to meet the Son of Man.

And it's fascinating, finally, notice what he says there, look at that. He says pray that you may have the strength to stand before the Son of Man, right, to stand before the judgment. This is another interesting theme in Luke's gospel, okay. If you go back to Luke 13:24 there's this fascinating passage — it's not in the lectionary for today. But I'm going to read it to you just to give you an image there, when somebody asked Jesus a question, "And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" So they're asking him how many people are going to be saved? And Jesus says, "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter but will not be able." Literally in the Greek what he says there is, "Many I tell you will seek to enter but will not be strong enough." It's the same Greek word that he uses in the Olivet Discourse. So what's he talking about "not be strong enough", "pray for strength"? He's not talking Arnold Schwarzenegger here. He's not talking about physical strength, bodybuilding or exercise. He's talking about spiritual strength and spiritual exercises. So in contrast to people who live their lives in drunkenness and dissipation, acting as if the final judgment is never going to come, and that Jesus is never going to return, and that you're not going to have to give an account for every idle word you utter and everything you've ever done, his disciples are called to pray at all times, to keep vigil, right. And also to develop spiritual exercises that will strengthen them in their detachment from the world and their attachment to Christ. So that when the time comes

to meet him they will be ready; they will be strong enough as he says here. He's not talking about physical strength; he's talking about spiritual strength.

And I just offer something to reflect on. One of the things — you've probably had this experience — if you've ever read the lives of the Saints is the astounding spiritual strength of the Saints. Not just of their ability to fast, or to pray for hours on end, to establish monasteries and convents, to travel to the ends of the earth to make disciples of Jesus like the missionary orders, but their spiritual strength in the power of their holiness. The power of their ability to convert souls to Christ, to draw people to Jesus, flows out of the fact that they've been engaged in spiritual exercises, right. There not just lounging about; they're not just laying about. They're trying to grow every single day in holiness, in prayer, in fasting, in reading the word of God, in teaching and preaching. And so I don't know about you, but whenever I read the lives of the Saints I feel like a spiritual wimp, right. Maybe you've had this experience: you buy one of these exercise videos and you start to watch these people who have been training and exercising every day and then you try to do what they do and you can't. Why? Well because you're not strong enough. The same thing is true in the life of holiness, right. We have to perform spiritual exercises if we want to be strong, if we want to grow in strength. We can't just assume that because we're baptized we're going to be strong. No, baptism makes us a child of God but it doesn't make us an adult; it doesn't bring us into spiritual adulthood. In order to be an adult we have to learn, we have to grow, but we also have to exercise. We have to exercise our spiritual faculties.

So, I think this is fascinating and real important that at the very beginning of the liturgical year the church places before us the exhortation to grow in strength. To pray, to keep vigil, and to prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus through spiritual exercises. And that should set a tone for our Advent season that may be somewhat different than the popular secular tone set by the Christmas season and preparation for Christmas. So if you look at the Advent season you'll notice the liturgical colors for the Advent season are purple — I'm wearing a purple shirt right now because it's the first Sunday of Advent. Well, purple is always in the church a color of penance; it's a penitential season. And although Advent is of course not as solemn a penitential season as Lent is, for example, at the same time the very colors that we use tell us that it should be a time of intensified spiritual exercises. Whether it be prayer, whether it be fasting, whether it be vigils like spending time staying

awake waiting for Christ, reading his word, whatever it might be, however, whatever exercises, praying the rosary. Whatever exercises you're going to do to prepare there should be a difference between your spiritual exercises in Ordinary Time and your spiritual exercises in the Advent season. Because the Church is calling us to prepare for the coming of Jesus. Both his coming in the Feast of Christmas but also, in a sense, even more for his second coming at the end of time, for the final judgment, to get ready for the judgment.

And the reality, and you might be thinking while I'm saying this, well Dr. Pitre it's been 2000 years, he's probably not coming back this year, right. Well you know he might not come back this Advent, but you might die this Advent. There are going to be people who die during this Advent season, who are going to encounter Christ, who are going to stand before the judgment seat of Christ in their particular judgment if not the final judgment. And no one of us Christians knows the day or hour of that encounter of our particular judgment. So it's prudent, it's wise for the church every year to call us to pray, to keep vigil, and to get ready to meet Jesus. That's what we're doing during the Advent season.

Alright, end of homily. Okay so what about the Old Testament reading for today, Jeremiah 33. We go back to the Old Testament and what we have here in the first reading is a prophecy of the Messiah. So remember Jeremiah — just to put him in context — is a priest and a prophet in the city of Jerusalem. He is prophesying in the Sixth Century before Christ, right around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 B.C. So Jeremiah was the great prophet who warned the sinful residents of Jerusalem, especially the priests and the leaders, to stop sinning so that God would not allow the Babylonians to destroy the Temple. But of course they didn't stop and therefore the Temple was ultimately destroyed. And in the context of his many prophecies of destruction Jeremiah also gave some positive prophecies of a future king, of a future deliver, who unlike the wicked priest of his own day would be a righteous judge and would be a righteous ruler. And, he calls that figure “the branch.” So let's look at who that is. Jeremiah 33 verse 14 and following:

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring forth for David; and he

shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'

Okay, I played with a lot of branches when I was a kid, usually used them to hit my brothers and that kind of thing. Why does Jeremiah compare the future King of Israel to a branch? Not just compare him, why does he call him a branch? It seems a strange thing. Well this alludes to a prophecy from the Book of Isaiah chapter 11, in which Isaiah has an image of the kingdom of David and he says I saw a shoot sprout from the stump of the tree of the house of Jesse. Okay, Jesse was King David's father. So what Isaiah sees here is that the house of Jesse, the kingdom of David, has been cut down like a tree and now it's just a stump, right. Maybe you've cut down a tree in your backyard, you get it down to a stump, but you don't grind the stump out. What can happen? Eventually a branch or shoot might sprout forth from that tree. So it might look dead but if it's still alive and the roots are still there you can have a branch grow out of the stump, okay. So here Jeremiah takes that image from Isaiah and he applies it to the Messiah.

What is this branch sprouting forth from David's apparently destroyed kingdom? Well, it's the future Davidic king; it's the future Messiah. So, why would the Church put an image of a branch from a tree of Jesse on the First Sunday of Advent? Hmm, let's see, any Advent traditions that make you think about that prophecy? Yeah, the Advent Jesse tree. Maybe you've celebrated this with your family. I know my wife and children, we've done it together. Where you set up a tree; it's called a Jesse tree, at the beginning of the Advent season and then you'll decorate it with certain symbols or passages from Scripture that tell you the story of salvation history. Why do we have this custom of an Advent Jesse tree? Well, it's real simple. It's because we are putting ourselves back in time into the shoes of the Jews who were waiting for the future coming of the Messiah — who were waiting for the branch of Jesse's tree to sprout again, so that the kingdom would come back at the time of the Messiah.

So what the Church is doing here is really interesting. Advent is focused on two comings: the coming of the Messiah in the incarnation at Christmas and the coming of Christ as judge at the end of time. And so, what does she do? She gives us both images in the readings for today. The gospel image is about the final

coming of Jesus at the end of time and the Old Testament reading is about the first coming of Jesus as the Messiah with the incarnation. And so the two comings kind of come together in the readings for the Old and the New Testaments today. So, on the one hand it can be a little kind of confusing if you're trying to figure out, "Well, what's Advent about?" If you think it's just about one thing you're going to miss the point. The whole point is it's about two things: the coming of Christ at Christmas and the coming of Jesus at the end of time. And so the readings reflect that for today.

And if you have any doubts about that you need only go to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. A couple of lines from the living tradition here, in paragraph 524 of the Catechism, the church says this. It says:

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*.²

So, think about it. The Jews had to wait a thousand years for the promises to David to be fulfilled in Christ. We only have to wait four weeks before we get to celebrate Christmas. So it's kind of a shortened liturgical experience of the longing of the Jewish people for the coming of the Messiah in the first advent, which is then supposed to enkindle in our hearts a longing for the desire of his second coming at the end of time. And in that regard I would ask you just to kind of ponder: do you long for Jesus Christ to return? Do you reflect on the mystery of his final advent? Maybe you do, maybe you don't. If it hasn't been that big of a part of your spiritual life, Advent would be a great time to really take some time and pray about the second coming, about the final judgment. What will it be like, as Jesus says, to stand before the Son of Man on the last day. What will his second coming be like, right, when he comes in power and glory?

I'll give you one answer to that question to reflect on: Augustine. St. Augustine, great father, church father, doctor of the church from the Fourth Century A.D. —

² CCC 524

he pondered the mystery of Jesus' second coming. And this is what he said — I'll close with this insight from the living tradition. Augustine wrote:

As I see it, [the *Parousia*] could be taken in two ways. One way is that he will come in the church as in a cloud.... He comes with great power and majesty because his greater power and majesty will appear in the saints to whom he will give great power... The other way in which he will come will be in his body in which he sits at the right hand of the Father. In this body, he died, rose again, and ascended into heaven. It is written in the Acts of the Apostles... "He shall so come as you have seen him going away" (Acts 1:11). We have reason to believe that he will come not only in the same body but also in a cloud since he will come as he left, and a cloud received him as he went."³

Augustine's *Letter* 199. So what's Augustine saying there? Well when he ponders the mystery of the second coming of Christ there are two dimensions to it. In the New Testament it says that he will come with his Saints, with his holy ones. So there's a sense in which the glory with which he will come will be the glory of all of the righteous ones, all of the angels that the Son of Man will come with. On the other hand, Augustine also says the glory of the second coming will be the fact that he comes in his body. And that's really a great mystery to ponder if you think about it. Christ died; he rose again in the same body that was crucified; he ascended to heaven with the same body that was raised, and he sits at the right hand of the Father, as the Catechism says, *in his body*. He is *bodily* seated at the right hand of the Father. So that when Jesus returns in the second coming, in his final advent, he will come *in his body*. And, as Acts says, he will come in the same way as you saw him go. So in a sense, what the apostles witnessed in a local way, in the mystery of the ascension, we will all see in a global way, in a universal way, in the second coming of Christ at the end of time. And that's what the church is calling us to prepare for in this Advent season.

³ Augustine, *Letter* 199; trans. in A. Just, p. 324