

ADVENT

Advent, (from Latin *adventus*, “**coming**”) is the season when Christians prepare for the coming of Jesus.

The four Sundays preceding Christmas are recognized with four virtues, symbolized by the candles on the Advent wreath – hope, love, joy and peace.

Advent candles symbolize the change from darkness to light, the light that dispels the darkness of sin. We light purple candles during the first two weeks, representing the time to pray and repent. On Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday, we light the rose candle which signifies joy as we await the birth of Jesus, our Savior. We light the last purple candle on the fourth Sunday of Advent signifying the final week of prayer and penance.

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

(John 8:12)

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Mk 13:33-37 Come, Lord Jesus

The central theme of today's readings is Jesus' warning to us to be alert, watchful and prepared because Christ's Second Coming, coinciding with the end of the world, can occur at any time. Jesus, in today's Gospel, gives us the assurance that we need not be afraid of the end of the world, Christ's Second Coming and the Last Judgment, if we remain alert and prepared. The Church invites us on this first Sunday of Advent to prepare for Christ's Second Coming, first by properly celebrating during this Christmas season the fond memory of Christ's first coming 2,000 years ago, second, by experiencing Christ's daily advent or coming in the Eucharistic celebrations, in the Holy Bible and in the worshipping community, and third, by preparing for Jesus' Second Coming which, for us, will happen at the moment of our deaths or at the end of the World.

In the first reading, Isaiah prays for God's active presence so that the Jewish community, returned from Babylonian exile, may remain faithful to their God. In the second reading, St. Paul prays for the reconversion of Christians in Corinth who have misused their gifts and charisms and remain ill-prepared for Christ's Second Coming. In today's Gospel, using the parable of the servants and gatekeeper of an absentee master who could return at any time, Jesus instructs His followers to be alert and watchful while doing their Christian duties with sincerity. Although the time of His return is uncertain, the reward or punishment is sure and certain.

We should live in the living presence of Jesus every day waiting for His Second Coming. The early Christians experienced it, and that is why the mutual greeting among Christians was not "Hi!" or "Good Morning!" but the Aramaic, "Maran Atha" which means "Come, Lord Jesus." This greeting acknowledged Jesus present in each of them and about to return. May God bless you and keep you ever prepared for Christ's coming.

Monday of the First Week of Advent

Mt 4:18-22 Andrew's Generous Spirit

We have heard the story of the call of Andrew along with his brother Simon Peter and the other set of brothers, James and John. There is a great simplicity about the passage. Jesus saw the two brothers, Simon and Andrew, making a cast with their net, going about their daily work, and He called out to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Mt 4:19). Immediately the two brothers left what they were doing and followed Jesus.

The story is perhaps streamlined for the decision of these two brothers must have taken some time. You would expect that there must have been some resistance to the call of Jesus, because it meant leaving what they were familiar with and good at and heading out into the unknown.

Catching people is a lot more challenging than catching fish. Gathering people into the net of God's Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus is much more complicated than gathering fish from the Sea of Galilee into fishing nets. Yet, if there was hesitation in Andrew and Simon, they obviously overcame it; they threw in their lot with Jesus. They became great preachers of the Gospel.

The way the Lord works in our own lives is perhaps not all that different to the way He worked in the lives of Andrew and Simon. He often calls out to us amid our daily tasks. He calls us beyond where we are, beyond the familiar, in the service of the coming of God's Kingdom. That call can come to us in small and subtle ways. We may find ourselves resisting it, but if we attend to it and allow it to resonate within us, and respond to it, we will often discover that the Lord works through us for good in ways that can surprise us.

Tuesday of the First Week of Advent
Lk 10:21-24 Jesus Praises His Father

When the seventy-two disciples returned after successfully completing their mission, Jesus rejoiced with them and thanked His Father saying aloud a spontaneous prayer expressing three great thoughts.

The first thought is that God hates intellectual pride and loves childlike simplicity and humility. Jesus says that only humble people with open minds can experience Him as Lord and Savior.

The second thought is about the unique relationship between Jesus and His Father. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are equal in being, possessing the same Divine life and knowledge. Since the Son is no less perfect than the Father, He is uniquely qualified to reveal the inner life of the Trinity to the world. Jesus was sent to show the world what God looks like and how God behaves.

The third thought is Jesus' claim that He is the expected Messiah Whom the prophets have foretold. Hence, Jesus asserts that His disciples are blessed with the great privilege of seeing, hearing, and experiencing God in human form.

We need to make use of our blessings. We are more blessed than many who lived in Jesus' time because we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior and have Him with us in the Eucharist, in the Bible, in the worshipping community and in each one of us as Emmanuel.

Let us participate in Jesus' Divine life.

Wednesday of the First Week of Advent
Mt 15:29-37 Jesus Heals the Crowds

The Decapolis was a loose federation of ten cities with a mixed population of Jews and Gentiles. Jesus took six months to travel to the Decapolis via Tyre and Sidon and to return to Galilee. The healing and feeding described in today's Gospel took place on a hill near the Sea of Galilee after Jesus' return from the Decapolis.

He healed the lame, the maimed, the blind, and the dumb. Then He felt pity for the hungry multitude and instructed His Apostles to feed them with what they had, namely, seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. At Jesus' command, the Apostles brought these to Jesus who said a prayer of thanksgiving over them and instructed the Apostles to distribute them to the people.

After the crowd had eaten their fill, the Apostles, again at Jesus' command, collected the broken pieces; they filled seven baskets with the fragments.

We need to help Jesus to heal the blind, the lame, the deaf and the mute today. Jesus desires to open our blind eyes and to loosen our tongues so that He may see and speak to the spiritually hungry through us.

Jesus invites us to lend Him our hearts so that He may touch the lives of people in our day through us, just as He touched the lives of millions through saintly souls like Francis of Assisi, Fr. Damien, Vincent de Paul and Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa). We need to be fed by Jesus.

Thursday of the First Week of Advent
Mt 7:21, 24-27 The House of God Built on Rock

In today's Gospel, the concluding part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us two warnings: that we must match our profession of Faith with actual obedience to the will of God and that we must build a life on the firm foundation of His teachings. Worship of God without commitment to the word of God is hypocrisy. Sincerity in a Christian can be demonstrated not by what one says but by what one does. Fine words can never be a substitute for fine deeds. Thus, today's Gospel gives Jesus' call to authentic discipleship based on the strong foundation of Gospel teaching. Acting on the words of Christ shows the authenticity of one's Christian commitment. Jesus contrasts a wise man who practices what he believes with a fool who does not practice his religious beliefs, using the images of one man who built his house on firm rock and another who built his house on loose sand in summer. Only a house with solid and firm foundation can resist the storm and flood, and only a person whose life has strong spiritual foundations can stand the test. Building on loose sand is the way to destruction. Thus, the two builders sum up two ways - the way of perfect righteousness and the way of self-righteousness. On the Day of Judgment, the first will stand; the second will fall.

We need to synchronize our practice of the Faith with our profession of it: The great test is the care and consideration we show to our neighbors, many of whom experience the absence of affection, of words of encouragement and of forgiveness. We need to build our families on strong foundations: There can be no great marriage and no great family without a solid foundation. Such a foundation exists when the husband and wife are the love of Christ for each other and for their children, in deeds as well as in words. Our culture and nation also need strong foundations based on the moral law of God and love of Jesus Christ, and this is possible only if our families are built on these foundations.

Friday of the First Week of Advent
Mt 9:27-31 Two Blind Men Follow Jesus

Today's Gospel describes Jesus' miraculous healing of two blind men who approached Him with trusting Faith. Blindness was common in Palestine because of the intense glare of the eastern sun, clouds of unclean flies and people's ignorance of cleanliness and hygiene.

The two blind men followed Jesus from the street up to His place of residence loudly expressing their confidence in the "Son of David" and requesting His mercy. Jesus found in these men what was required for receiving a miracle, namely a strong and expectant Faith, an earnest desire for vision and a sincere prayer for mercy.

Although they were instructed not to tell anyone of their healing, they expressed their gratitude to Jesus by bearing witness to His healing power in the town as soon as Jesus had healed them.

We, too, need light and eyesight because we are often blind to the needs and expectations of others living with us. We are also often blind to the presence of Jesus living in us and in others, to the blessings God showers on us and to the protection God gives us every day.

Hence, let us pray for the spiritual eyesight to realize and experience the presence of Jesus in ourselves and others, and for the good will to do good to and for others.

Saturday of the First Week of Advent
Mt 9:35-10: 1, 5, 6-8 The Task of Jesus' Disciples

Today's Gospel describes the three chief activities of Jesus' mission, namely heralding, teaching and healing, and tells how He selected His twelve apostles to help Him to carry out His action-plan. Jesus was primarily the herald of God, His Father.

Firstly, He brought the Good News that God is a loving, forgiving, merciful and compassionate Father Who wants everyone to be saved.

Secondly, He was a teacher and preacher who taught His Gospel, or the Good News of the Kingdom of God, by His exemplary life, demonstrating God's love, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion.

Thirdly, He was a healer, spending much of His time healing people of their bodily and mental illnesses.

The Gospel for today also mentions that Jesus selected ordinary men of no social status as His apostles to continue His preaching and healing mission, and that He gave them both healing power and preaching authority.

As Christians, we share Christ's mission of preaching and healing. This means that we, too, must demonstrate by our exemplary and transparent Christian lives the mercy, the forgiveness, and the unconditional love of Jesus.

We are also called to act as the agents of healing by praying for the sick, by helping them to get the necessary medical help and nursing and by encouraging them, supporting them, and boosting their morale.