

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

ADVENT: A SEASON OF ALERTNESS, PRAYER AND HOPE

“Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen, and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man” (Lk. 21: 36).

The Season of Advent: Today we begin the season of Advent. The Advent season is significant in many ways. It is the beginning of the new liturgical year. It reminds us that the year is ending. In the words of T. S. Eliot: “What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.” This is true of the season of Advent as well. The word “Advent” from its Latin etymology, “Ad venire” meaning “to come,” gives a clue to what the season is mostly about. In Advent, we prepare for the Coming of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, into the world as our Saviour. Advent evokes a sense of “waiting” and “expectancy” which nourishes and sustains our hope in the Coming of Christ, our Lord. In Advent we prepare for the three-fold Coming of Jesus: in the past in history, in the present in majesty, and in the future in mystery. Christ came as a babe in the manger; He is here with us as our Lord; and will come again as our King. In his First Sunday of Advent 2020 Angelus Message, Pope Francis told the crowd at St. Peter’s Square: “Advent is a continuous call to hope. It reminds us that God is present in history to lead it to its goal and to its fullness, which is the Lord Jesus Christ. God is present in the history of humanity, He is the ‘God-with-us,’ He walks beside us to support us. The Lord never abandons us; He accompanies us through the events of our lives to help us discover the meaning of the journey, the meaning of everyday life, to give us courage when we are under duress or when we suffer. Amid life’s storms, God always extends His hand to us and frees us from threats.” This is the reassurance that comes with Advent as it ushers us into the celebration of Christmas, the Birth of Christ.

Like Life, Like Advent: The season of Advent captures the reality of our life – the reality of waiting, expecting and hoping. Our entire life is a complex dialectics of waiting and expectation. This is also the dynamics of our spiritual life, a life sustained by hope. The parents wait (for nine months) for the child to be born, they watch and wait and wean the child, he grows slowly as they wait, starts school and they wait for him to finish, to grow to become a man, who takes up responsibilities and waits for his endeavours to develop. He falls in love and waits for the relationship to mature, so marriage can take place. the cycle continues and a time comes to wait for this life to end so that another life can begin. At every wait, man prays to God waiting expectantly for his prayers to be answered. Our life is an advent of some sort – a waiting, an expectation in hope for the events of life to unfold.

Our Wait is Not in Vain: The Readings of today evoke these themes of “Waiting”, “Expectation” and “Hope” that characterise this season. In the First Reading (Jer. 33: 14-16) prophet Jeremiah turns our attention to the promise made to David about a thousand years before Christ. The expression “In those days” used twice in the short reading is

significant as it draws our gazes to a time to look forward to, a time of waiting for these promises to be fulfilled. By hindsight, these promises were fulfilled in Christ, “a virtuous Branch,” “a righteous offspring of David” Who “will practice honesty and integrity in the land.” The Psalm, too, sounds the theme of Israel’s ancient waiting and expectation: “Guide me in your truth and teach me. For you are God my saviour and for you I will wait all day.” Though these themes are not dominant in the Second Reading (1 Thess. 9: 11-13) it is implied in the prayers of St. Paul for the young Church of Thessalonica, as he waits for heaven to give the answers to his supplications. We are confident that our waiting is not in vain because our God is the same God of Israel, Who was faithful to His promises to David. He will honour His word to us His children today. Our wait is not in vain, and our expectation shall be fulfilled. For those who hope in the Lord shall not be disappointed (Ps. 125: 1-2; Is. 40: 31; Joel 2: 26).

Be Vigilant: The Gospel message can be summed up in one word – vigilance. This word carries with it all the nuance of Advent – the waiting, the expectation, and the hope. Jesus draws from the Old Testament images of chaos and instability—turmoil in the heavens (Is. 13: 11, 13; Ezek. 32: 7-8; Joel 2: 10); clamour of the ocean and its waves (Is. 5: 30; 17: 12); distress among the nations (Is. 8: 22; 14: 25); and people terrified and dying (Is. 13: 6-11). He uses Danuel’s image of “the Son of Man coming on a cloud of glory” to describe His return as the True King, Who comes to judge the living and the dead (Dan. 7: 13-14). These images evoke frightening emotions, but Jesus calms us down by showing us the guidelines to survival at these times of “Parousial” manifestations:

1. **Stand erect, hold your head high:** This is a posture of attention, preparation and readiness. From the Gospels it is obvious that “No one knows the day or the hour” this will come about. Therefore, it behoves us to be always prepared so that whenever the Master comes “be it at night, at dawn” He will find us ready. Pope Francis again said: “During Advent we do not just live in anticipation of Christmas; we are also called to rekindle the anticipation of the glorious return of Christ, when he will return at the end of time, preparing ourselves, with consistent and courageous choices, for the final encounter with him. We remember Christmas, we await the glorious return of Christ, and our personal encounter: the day in which the Lord will call.”
2. **Watch yourselves:** Jesus teaches: “Watch yourselves, or your hearts will be coarsened by debauchery and drunkenness and cares of life, and the day will be sprung upon you suddenly, like a trap.” In other words, be careful what you do. Do not let yourself be carried away by the savouries of appetites and the transitory flashes of this worldly life. So that you may not give in to the devil and fall into sin. It is the time to apply caution and mean in all actions. It is the season to draw closer

to God the He may fill us with His grace to accomplish all in accordance with His will.

3. ***Stay awake, praying at all times:*** The season of Advent is the favourable time to step up our prayer life. At this time, we recall the admonishing of Peter by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: “pray so that you may not fall.” St. Paul exhorts: “pray constantly.” As we pray always, we must remember also to accompany our prayers with good action. Therefore, love at all times; forgive at all times; share what you have with all those in need around you; be helpful, kind, compassionate, always be empathetic with cheerful disposition.

My dear friends, as Jesus says, “Do not be frightened” (Lk. 21: 9). This is not the time to be scared, terrified nor be despondent and let yourselves be deceived (Lk. 21: 8-19). Instead, this is a time to be confidently hopeful in God’s promise to send His Son as our Saviour for our “redemption is at hand”. These words of Pope Francis sum up our reflection today: “During Advent we do not just live in anticipation of Christmas; we are also called to rekindle the anticipation of the glorious return of Christ, when he will return at the end of time, preparing ourselves, with consistent and courageous choices, for the final encounter with him. We remember Christmas, we await the glorious return of Christ, and our personal encounter: the day in which the Lord will call” (Pope Francis Angelus, 2 December 2018).