

*This Sunday's*

## SCRIPTURE

THE HOMILIST'S GUIDE TO AUTHENTIC PREACHING

Year B Readings, Lectionary #2

*First Sunday of Advent*

Presence and absence define the theme of the readings as we begin Advent. In the first reading [Isaiah], the people mourn God's apparent distance, blaming their own sin: "You have hidden your face from us, and delivered us up to our guilt." Paul, in contrast, celebrates the coming of redemption in Christ but acknowledges that his people still await more: "You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord" [Corinthians, second reading]. And in the gospel expectant watching is the word: "Be alert! You do not know when the time will come" [Mark]. By itself the gospel could add to the pre-Christmas anxiety; but with the other passages the assembly will hear a message of measured hope and challenge. How will you help them to hear this, so that they might enter the season with a balanced approach to transient but real needs, while keeping their attention fixed on the main thing?

## Prayer

*Spend a few moments in prayer before reading the Scripture. Ask the Lord to let his Word speak to your heart.*

Renew me in this new season, One who has come and will come again! Deepen my insight into your promise; let me feel deeply your absence now; and sustain me in hope. Amen.

## ENTERING THE WORD

Read the Scripture for this Sunday several times. Let its words and phrases truly affect you. Over the next few days, take an inward glance:

- [Isaiah] *"Would that you might meet us doing right."* What would "doing right" involve for you this Advent? What is God's invitation? What new thing might God want to do in and through you this year?
- [Isaiah] *"We have all withered like leaves, and our guilt carries us away."* When have you felt like this? What happened to bring you to such a pass? Sit with the memories: What does God have to teach you in them?
- [Corinthians] *"I give thanks to my God always on your account."* Who do you think prays this way about you? Make a list of some of the people whom you have helped through your ministry. What feelings arise as you consider the web of prayer and affection into which God has woven you?
- [Corinthians] *"He will keep you firm to the end."* Do you ever find yourself thinking that constancy in faith and charity has to be your own doing? Can you relax into God for some time this Advent?
- [Mark] *"He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his own work."* What is your primary work until the Lord returns?
- [Mark] *"May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping."* What "puts you to sleep" about the Lord's charge to you? Think of three or four missed opportunities in your life or ministry: What happened? Draw out in mind not only the events, but the feelings and—most of all—what you now see as the causes of your inattention.

# EXAMINING THE WORD

## FIRST READING: Isaiah 63:16b–17, 19b; 64:2–7

The last six chapters of Isaiah draw a huge and colorful fresco of salvation, where Jerusalem appears entirely restored, consoled, and reinstated in all its splendor, to be the host of nations who gather as one worshipping people. The prophet must, however, be realistic in taking into account the present state of the city, some time in the second half of the sixth century (after the return from Babylon), which is far less bright. The temple still awaits rebuilding, and so does the healing from the trauma of the exile. The divisions within the community still need to be addressed. So the prophet's meditation on Israel's history shifts to the tragic tone of intense supplication to the Lord, that he may put an end to his silence and may fulfill his promises.

Today's reading is part of that prayer that extends, in the book of Isaiah, from 63:7 to 64:11. But while the first part of that prayer (63:7–14) was very serene in tone, the second is dominated by questions raised by the prophet on behalf of his community: "Where is your zealous care and your might, your surge of pity and your mercy?" (63:15); "Why do you let us wander, O Lord from your ways...? Why have the wicked invaded your holy place, why have our enemies trampled your sanctuary?" (63:17–18); "Can you hold back, O Lord, after all this? Can you remain silent, and afflict us so severely?" (64:11).

These questions are very daring and could seem out of place to open our Advent season. And yet, through these huge questions, we can see that hope is dawning. We see the firm conviction of the prophet and the people that God remains committed to his promises. God will, in due time, act as the Father and the Redeemer of Israel (63:14b). Just as the questions were radical, the sense of trust expressed in the prophet's prayer is unreserved: "Yet, O Lord, you are our father; we are the clay and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hands" (64:7). This is a great opportunity for us to make ourselves malleable for God to fashion us to his liking.

## SECOND READING: 1 Corinthians 1:3–9

Paul will be quick to address the problem of divisions among the young Christian community in Corinth. But this doesn't mean that all is wrong in the community. Far from it. Today's reading, which makes for most of the Apostle's address to the Corinthians, shows that "the church of God that is in Corinth" (verse 2) has been blessed by great gifts and stands firm in its waiting for the full "revelation" of Christ. This short reading is filled with some of the favorite theological themes of Paul: *thanksgiving, grace of God, testimony to Christ, spiritual gift* (in Greek: *charisma*), *revelation* (in Greek: *apocalypsis*), *fellowship* (in

Greek: *koinônia*). Paul also praises the Corinthians for the enrichment of their discourse and their knowledge and for the way they have been receptive to God's gifts.

The overall tone is that of gratitude and serenity. The selection made by the liturgists gives it an "apocalyptic" flavor anticipating that of today's gospel. Not only is the word *apocalypse* used here, but Paul also makes a clear reference to "the end" and to "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." The conclusion he draws though for the Corinthians is that they have no reason to fear, because "God is faithful." He is the one who will "keep (the Corinthians) firm to the end" and will ensure their "fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." There is no reason then to presume that all early Christian communities anticipated somewhat frantically a quick return of Christ on earth.

## GOSPEL: Mark 13:33–37

While hearing this gospel reading, we might feel we're repeating the last Sundays in ordinary time, all geared towards the second coming of Christ. Are we not supposed to focus, during Advent, on his first coming? But upon reflection, we realize that the theme given by Jesus to his disciples and repeated with great emphasis is quite in season for Advent: "Be watchful! Be alert...!"

There is also a second reason why this gospel reading is well suited for this Sunday. This reason is what we can call the unity of God's plan of salvation. It's so easy to consider the Nativity story as "the nicest story ever told," but to make of it some kind of a "post card" stuck in a time warp and forget the "not yet" of salvation, the ongoing and dynamic character of salvation brought about by Christ. The Nativity story was just a beginning, a beautiful one indeed, and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus have earned us life eternal and salvation. But we still have to live and journey in history: hence the necessity for us to remain alert and watchful for the second coming of Christ.

The fact of the matter is that chapter 13 of Mark is the earliest version of what has been called the "Apocalypse of the Synoptics" (together with Matthew 24 and Luke 21). It's interesting to note, in that context, that far from being a revelation of doom and gloom, this earliest version describes the return of the Son of Man only in terms of ingathering of the elect: "And then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in the clouds' with great power and glory, and then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of the sky" (Mk 13:26-27). Isn't it interesting that the purpose of the second coming of Christ is the same as that of his first coming in the flesh? Salvation remains the unifying goal and purpose of his first and of his second coming.

## ENRICHING YOUR REFLECTION

I am always amazed to see how easily and unscrupulously some Christians can disregard some of the most unambiguous statements made by Jesus and claim that they are the only ones who hold the right interpretation. The opening statement made by Jesus in today's gospel is clearest example of the kind: "But of that day and hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

God knows, however, how much speculation there has been, especially in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, about the calendar and the script of events surrounding the end time and the second coming of Christ. All kinds of sources have been advocated: the so-called "prophecies" of Nostradamus, the list of 111 cryptic captions attributed to Saint Malachi and thought to predict all upcoming successors of Saint Peter in Rome, private revelations such as the secret of Fatima or visions of Catherine Emmerich and Padre Pio.

Well it simply doesn't make sense to give credit to any speculation about the end times. This is pure

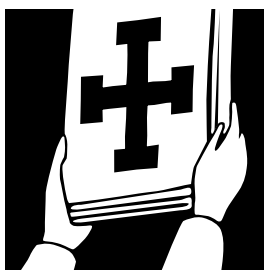
waste of time. The real question is: now that we know that we cannot know the day or hour of Christ's return, how are we going to live out our journey on earth? We should be watchful and ready at all times! Getting excited about the turn of the millennium or for the lining up of planets is one thing. But getting prepared and ready for the One in whom we believe and whom we claim to "await in joyful hope" by accepting to change our lives *now* is the only thing that counts.

I suggest we imitate Saint John Bosco, founder of the Salesians. It is reported among his "fioretti" that while he was playing with some of his classmates at the minor seminary, a priest interrupted them and asked: "My friends, what would you do if you knew that the end of the world will come within the next hour?" One of the young men said he would go immediately to confession, another one that he would go to the chapel and pray. John Bosco replied: "I would continue to play." This is what you call being ready and serene. What would be our reply to the same question?

## ENGAGING YOUR COMMUNITY

After you have read and reflected prayerfully on the Scripture, take an outward glance. Think about the experiences and concerns of the people to whom you will be preaching.

- [Isaiah] "*Why do you let us wander, O Lord, from your ways?*" What do people claim keeps them from becoming closer to Christ? Can you show parishioners that you understand the real pressures they are under?
- [Corinthians] "*By him you were called to fellowship with his Son.*" To what degree are people eager for more than a distant, worshipful attitude toward Christ? What are the marks of the "fellowship" Paul describes here? What evidence of it is there in your community?
- [Mark] "*You do not know when the time will come.*" With Christmas predictable and the final consummation seemingly remote, what sort of realistic "not knowing" can you recommend to people? What surprising things might they miss for lack of attention at each moment?
- [Mark] "*May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping.*" Can you develop two or three practical recommendations for people so that the pre-Christmas season does not distract them from Advent?



### Write a homily

People have many experiences of presence and absence—some joyful, some poignant, some full of pain. Yet with Christ our experience may most often be dulled by habit and inattention. How will you invite your hearers to trust that a more vivid relationship—including the pain of absence—is possible and desirable? How will you help them obey Jesus when he says, "Watch"?

# Prayer

*To conclude your preparation, think about the community for whom you've just prepared the homily and spend a few moments in prayer.*

Lord, you open my eyes when I study your Word and prepare to preach. Keep me alert to your presence throughout each day. At the least, let me feel the pain of missing you. Amen.

## Faith Sharing Question

*For use in the parish bulletin, with faith-sharing groups, or to be adapted as the question of the week for the parish as a whole.*

- How faithful do you feel you are being to God's plan for you?

*Does your parish have a creative way of using a weekly faith sharing question? Tell us about it at [TTPubs@aol.com](mailto:TTPubs@aol.com).*

## ENHANCING THE LITURGY

### Introduction to the Penitential Rite

Dear brothers and sisters, Advent calls us to wake up. Let us pray that the coming of the Prince of Peace will revive our hope and generate new initiatives of peace and reconciliation among nations.

### Penitential Rite

You are our redeemer and Lord. Remember not our sins, and have mercy on us. Lord, have mercy.

You have come to call sinners and to show them the infinite love of your Father. Christ, have mercy.

You reconcile us to the Father and the Son and among us. Lord, have mercy.

### Catechumenate Dismissal

Dear friends, you too have been led to the light of the gospel. May your spiritual journey in this blessed season of Advent be filled with hope and joy.

### General Intercessions

**Presider:** God has sent his Son, the Word made flesh, to bring the fullness of life, light, and salvation to the world. Let us pray for our needs.

**Leader:** For the leaders of the world, that they read the signs of the times and unite together to

find lasting solutions for the future of this planet, we pray to the Lord.

**Leader:** For the church, awaiting the second coming of Christ, that we may keep alert and watchful through changing and trying times, we pray to the Lord.

**Leader:** For our local community, that we may live this season of Advent in a renewed spirit of joy and hope as we keep our eyes set on Christ, we pray to the Lord.

**Leader:** For those who live in fear and helplessness because of war, famine, or natural catastrophes, that they may find relief and assistance, we pray to the Lord.

**Leader:** For our departed brothers and sisters, who have died in Christ, that they may have a full share in his glory, we pray to the Lord.

**Presider:** O gracious Father, you care so much for the world. Don't let the darkness of evil and hatred prevail over the flame of your love. May the good news of your Son's birth in Bethlehem, which we will celebrate soon, open up new horizons of hope, light, and joy for all

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