

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

First Sunday of Advent

Year A

27 November 2022



Collect

Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God,
the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ
with righteous deeds at his coming,
so that, gathered at his right hand,
they may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

The former eucharistic acclamation, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again,” succinctly wove together the past, present and future dimensions of the paschal mystery. The same perspectives are at play throughout the four weeks of the Advent season. The prism of Advent refracts the mystery of Christ’s coming into beams of past, present and future.

Here the future comes first. The season begins with a strong focus on Christ’s coming in judgement at the end of time. As the weeks pass, our attention is drawn more and more to the historical drama of Christ’s birth and how it was foreshadowed by the prophets. But hope and memory are held together throughout by the constant coming of Christ among us and within us.

Paying attention to the “now” of Christ’s presence is a challenge at this time of year. So much is happening around us, so many things to complete, so many things to prepare for. The secret is simple: hold fast to one word in our hearts. That word is “Emmanuel”: God-with-us.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 2:1–5

The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz,
concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
In the days to come
the mountain of the Temple of the Lord
shall tower above the mountains
and be lifted higher than the hills.
All the nations will stream to it,
peoples without number will come to it;
and they will say:

‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the Temple of the God of Jacob
that he may teach us his ways
so that we may walk in his paths;
since the Law will go out from Zion,
and the oracle of the Lord from Jerusalem.’

He will wield authority over the nations
and adjudicate between many peoples;
these will hammer their swords into ploughshares,
their spears into sickles.
Nation will not lift sword against nation,
there will be no more training for war
O House of Jacob, come,
let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 121:1–2, 4–5, 6–9

R. Let us go rejoicing to the house of the Lord.

I rejoiced when I heard them say:
‘Let us go to God’s house.’
And now our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem. **R.**

It is there that the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord.
For Israel’s law it is,
there to praise the Lord’s name.
There were set the thrones of judgement
of the house of David. **R.**

For the peace of Jerusalem pray:
‘Peace be to your homes!
May peace reign in your walls,
in your palaces, peace!’ **R.**

For love of my brethren and friends
I say: ‘Peace upon you!’
For love of the house of the Lord
I will ask for your good. **R.**

First Reading

The very first reading of the season is a glorious vision of universal peace. The prophet Isaiah depicts the hill-top city of Jerusalem as the earthly counterpart of the heavenly mount from which God reigns. All the peoples of the earth will flock there; everyone will learn and follow the ways of the Lord; war will end and peace will prevail.

With this oracle readers have the opportunity to establish a strong spirit of Advent hope at the outset of the season. It is a powerful declaration, full of confidence and conviction. It has a high poetic character that needs to be respected and not rushed through or reduced to matter-of-fact recitation. Each element of the oracle should be allowed its role in depicting the scene. The vision proper is divided into two parts by the direct speech of the people. Readers will need to change their tone here from proclamation to response.

Readers are inviting the assembly to see with Isaiah’s eyes and to make the strength of his faith its own. In brief, this text calls for positive and deliberate delivery. When the reader eventually proclaims the familiar words of swords being made into ploughshares and spears into sickles, the assembly should have no hesitation in giving their heartfelt assent.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 121/122, used here almost in full, is a fitting match for the first reading. Being one of the “psalms of ascent” prayed by pilgrims on their way up the slopes of Jerusalem, it breathes the same spirit and uses the same words and images as Isaiah’s oracle. Jerusalem is envisaged as a centre of unity, the seat of judgement, and a source of joy and peace. If there is a difference, it is that the psalm is more narrowly focussed on the tribes of Israel rather than the nations of the world.

Of its very nature, the response should be announced with energy and enthusiasm. It immediately conveys the excitement and anticipation that the pilgrims would be sharing with one another. That is echoed in the first stanza. The second is longer and somewhat less exuberant, while the final two are full of urgency and a deeply felt desire for peace.

This is a prayer to be prayed with lively faith and in joyful spirit, but not rushed through. Its delights need to be savoured. Readers must resist the temptation to run the short lines together and reduce the poetry to prose. They must also give apt verbal and visual cues for a timely response to the six-line stanza.

**A reading from the first letter of St Paul
to the Romans 13:11 –14**

You know 'the time' has come: you must wake up now: our salvation is even nearer than it was when we were converted. The night is almost over, it will be daylight soon – let us give up all the things we prefer to do under cover of the dark; let us arm ourselves and appear in the light. Let us live decently as people do in the daytime: no drunken orgies, no promiscuity or licentiousness, and no wrangling or jealousy. Let your armour be the Lord Jesus Christ.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Matthew 24:37–44**

Jesus said to his disciples: 'As it was in Noah's day, so will it be when the Son of Man comes. For in those days before the Flood people were eating, drinking, taking wives, taking husbands, right up to the day Noah went into the ark, and they suspected nothing till the Flood came and swept all away. It will be like this when the Son of Man comes. Then of two men in the fields one is taken, one left; of two women at the millstone grinding, one is taken, one left.

'So stay awake, because you do not know the day when your master is coming. You may be quite sure of this that if the householder had known at what time of the night the burglar would come, he would have stayed awake and would not have allowed anyone to break through the wall of his house. Therefore, you too must stand ready because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.'

Second Reading

After Isaiah's inspirational vision of universal peace, complemented by the responsorial psalm, the second reading delivers what may be felt as a short, sharp shock. The brief excerpt from the final chapters of Paul's lengthy treatise on salvation, his letter to the Romans, offer a blunt warning. Time is short, the works of darkness must be abandoned, and the way of light chosen.

The key image at play is the elemental contrast between night and day. Paul expands on this by naming behaviours, whether of the flesh or of the mind, that shy away from exposure to the light. He doesn't offer a counter-list of the "works of day". It's worth noting that most translations, unlike the Jerusalem Bible, place the phrase "put on the armour of light" in the centre of the passage and "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" at the end. This latter phrase suggests the white garment in which the newly baptised is robed.

Regular readers will be aware that many of Paul's sentences are long and complex. Here he is plain and succinct. The text is a litany of direct appeals. The urgency and passion of these appeals should be readily conveyed by the reader. Each one calls for strong and measured delivery. The assembly should be under no illusion about the choice that Paul is calling for.

Gospel

Unlike the marked change of mood between the first and second readings, the transition to the gospel is seamless. Matthew's account of Jesus' warnings to his disciples is in tune with Paul's words to the Romans. If anything, the gospel takes the threat a step further. Jesus emphasises the suddenness and unpredictability of the coming of the Son of Man. In the first two examples, the people of Noah's day and common labourers busy at their task had no idea what was to happen.

The third example suggests some possibility of being prepared for the decisive event. Disciples could be like a householder who is foresighted enough to lie in wait for the burglar's intrusion. Jesus' boldness in likening the Son of Man to a burglar is striking. As several of his parables show, Jesus is unafraid of invoking dubious characters as role models when he wants to make a point.

Themes of upheaval and coming judgement dominate the chapters of Matthew's gospel that precede the passion narrative. It is often unclear whether the coming crisis that Jesus refers to is the destruction of Jerusalem or the end-time itself. Here it's plainly the latter. There's a wealth of background to the figure of the Son of Man and the end-time in the prophets, notably Daniel 7:13-14.

On this very first day of Advent, elements of unbounded hope are counter-balanced by sober warnings. Any inclination we might have to sentimentalise the season is brought up short. It's time to choose the light.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing for Advent

May the almighty and merciful God,
by whose grace we have placed our faith
in the First Coming of his Only Begotten Son
and yearn for his coming again
sanctify us by the radiance of Christ's Advent
and enrich us with his blessing.

Amen.

As we run the race of this present life,
may he make us firm in faith,
joyful in hope and active in charity.

Amen.

So that, rejoicing now with devotion
at the Redeemer's coming in the flesh,
we may be endowed with the rich reward of eternal life
when he comes again in majesty.

Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, + and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.

Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for Advent, *The Roman Missal* p. 709)