

Homily for the First Sunday of Advent, Year A

November 27, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Isaiah 2:1-5 (Come, let us climb the mountain to the Lord's house.)

Responsory: Psalm 122 (Let us go rejoicing to the house of the Lord.)

Second Reading: Romans 13:11-14 (It is the hour to awake from sleep.)

Gospel: Matthew 24:37-44 (Stay awake, for you do not know when the Son of Man will come.)

Today the holy season of *Advent* begins. Outside of its liturgical context, the word “advent” means simply the *arrival* of either an important person or an important event. For us Catholics, that important person is *Christ*, and the important event can be a number of different moments in his life. For example, in today’s Gospel, Jesus seems to be foreshadowing his *second coming*, at the end of time. Then, on the second and third Sundays of Advent, we’ll jump *backwards* in time to when Jesus makes his first public appearance, with John the Baptist trying to prepare the people to receive him. Finally, as Christmas approaches, we’ll move back in time again, to ponder Jesus’ *birth*. So, the meaning of the Advent season is actually much more complex than just preparing for Christmas.

Meanwhile, the *Old Testament* reading each week will come from the first part of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, which was written after the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrian Empire. As the Prophet attempted to comfort and reassure his people in the Southern Kingdom about their future, he anticipated the coming of a very special person, anointed by God to guide, instruct, protect and redeem them. This week, Isaiah sets the stage for his appearance by drawing everyone’s attention to God’s holy mountain, from which the word of the Lord will instruct everyone in his ways and teach them to walk in his paths. Then, as the season progresses, we’ll learn that this instruction actually will be delivered by *the Messiah*, who has not yet come into the world. With each week, this extraordinary individual will be revealed to us more and more clearly, and it will become obvious to us that the Prophet is foreshadowing the advent of Christ in the world.

At the same time, the *second* reading each week will come from New Testament epistles, which, not surprisingly, reflect on the “Christ event” that has already taken place. They’re written from essentially the same perspective that we have today, as people living in the Christian era. Like us, the people to whom these letters are written live in the “in-between times,” *after* Christ’s death and resurrection have transformed the human race, but *before* his second coming in glory.

So, every week of Advent, we will have:

- a *prophetic* reading that speaks of the Jewish people’s yearning for a Savior,
- a *Gospel* passage that focuses on the person of Christ and the significance of his coming into the world, and
- a reading from the *Christian era* that exhorts us to live our Christian faith to the fullest, *as if the Lord were going to return at any moment*.

That combination of readings makes for a deeply reflective season, which prepares us well to celebrate the Birth of Christ at Christmastime.

Today's prophecy from Isaiah offers a very hopeful image for a people worried about being overrun and destroyed by foreign enemies. Weapons of war will be beaten into harmless farming implements. Nations that had been at war will be at peace with one another. Instead of powerful nations dominating weaker ones and dictating their own terms, *the Lord himself* will judge between the nations and impose terms on *all of them*. But, how will this great transformation come about? The Prophet foresees peoples of all nations streaming toward God's holy mountain to receive instruction and gain knowledge of his ways. However, it's not obvious from the passage *who* will lead them there and teach them. Who will be a light to the nations, to reveal God's saving power to all the earth? The Prophet just says that *God* will do these things. But, we know whom the Father will send to carry out this mission. Next week we'll hear that he must spring from the "root of Jesse" (in other words, the family of King David), and the spirit of the Lord will rest upon him. Then we'll hear a prediction that, at his coming, the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be cleared. And, finally, we will hear that the virgin shall conceive and bear a son who is "God with us," that is, God incarnate. It's pretty obvious who this mystery man is, but let's resist the temptation to jump to the end of the story. There is value in walking through the Advent season week-by-week, letting the mystery gradually unfold before us.

Today Paul sounds a wake-up call for the Romans and for all of us. In the early years of Paul's ministry, he believed that Christ would return during his lifetime. He encouraged people to think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth, because he didn't think that this world would be around for much longer. However, by the time he wrote his Letter to the Romans, near the end of his missionary travels, he thought differently. Maybe the Lord was *not* going to return imminently, but salvation was still nearer than it was when Christians first accepted the faith. Paul came to understand that *every day* brings us closer to meeting Christ, and so, every day should be lived *as if we are preparing to meet the Lord*. We should be awake and sober, not caught up in useless, self-indulgent activities, but engaged in the works of the Lord instead. Jesus himself warned that in the days of Noah, people were blithely going about their lives with no thought about what calamities might befall them. Paul doesn't want Christians to make the same mistake. He wants us to pay attention, to "throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." He wants us to live like people who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ and who truly appreciate what that means. That's very good advice, for Christians of the first century *and* the twenty-first century.

Jesus adds a greater sense of *urgency* to Paul's message. He also calls for us to stay awake, but he makes it sound as if those who are *not* sufficiently alert may miss their opportunity to be saved. It's a pretty frightening thought that we could wait all our lives for the Lord to come and save us, and then he could come at an hour we do not expect, and we could be left behind. If that fear motivates us to *repent* and turn to the Lord, then perhaps it is actually a gift from God. His intent clearly is not to scare us away, but to encourage us to be prepared *at all times*. We don't know when we will meet the Lord, but we want it to be a *joyous and glorious encounter*.