

ADVENT I

First Sunday of Advent

Stir up we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy power and come – so that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the imminent dangers of our sins and made free by Thy deliverance.

Beloved in Christ,

it is with this Collect that the Church opens the liturgical year: Advent – that short season during which we pray and anticipate the Redeemer’s coming. With this heartfelt plea to God, the Church asks Him, in faith, for nothing less than a direct and divine intervention in the created order. With this collect – and the whole of the Advent liturgy – the Church places on our lips and in our hearts her own desire for the speedy coming of our long-awaited Messiah. And who is this prophetic figure? It is the Legate of God, the emissary from before the dawn of creation, God Himself, destined by the Father before time began to rescue His chosen people from the shipwreck of their fallen nature.

In the Advent liturgy the Church brings before our hearts a magnificent procession of patriarchs and visionaries of Israel who, like us now, longed for the coming of the Anointed One of God. They looked for His coming in time, only dimly aware of the possibility that He might come in grace and glory as well. And so, the liturgy marks the words and witness of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the long procession of major and minor prophets, among whom Isaiah stands out most strikingly.

This march of time and faith in the Old Testament ends with the voice of John, crying in the wilderness: *“Repent; prepare ye the way of the Lord,”* even as the Virgin Mother had, thirty years before, in her prophetic role as God-Bearer conceived and bore Him in the flesh. This child Whom angels adore and Who fulfills the longing of every human desire even unto the close of the ages.

Beloved children, this Messiah is none other than God Himself, Who conquers Satan and reigns over His people forever. It is He Whom all nations must serve. *“Come, O come, Emmanuel”* we cry – for the love of God in Christ extends not only to the people of Abraham and his descendants, but to all men of good will everywhere, in every age.

In the words of Isaiah, *“And when He comes we shall all be guided together by this divine shepherd...He shall feed His flock and He shall gather together the lambs with His arms and shall take them up in His bosom.”* This Christos – the Anointed One – Who is our Lord and God.

On Christmas day, in Bethlehem of Judea, the Christ child was born in time – 2000 years ago. Yet, in a special but very real way, on Christmas Day, 2018, He will be born again in our hearts by Sacrament and Sacrifice as we solemnly commemorate the anniversary of His birth. He refuses nothing to the prayer of His Church for it is His Mystical Spouse – the Bride for Whom He has given His life. He has come in time, and longs from eternity, to convey to our souls that same life, grace, and peace which animated the shepherds and wise men who drew near to His manger in adoration, wonder and love, lo these two thousand years.

But the first two weeks of this season remind us of another Advent of the Lord: that Christ will come again at the end of time. As the Matins hymn proclaimed earlier this morning, Christ will come “to condemn the guilty to flames and call the just with His loving voice into heaven.”

This twofold Advent represents through liturgical worship God’s twofold coming in time: that of mercy and His return in judgment. The first was marked by the poverty of His humanity; the second will be seen in the glory of His divine majesty. As the Old Testament prophets did not distinguish between these comings of the Messiah, neither does the Church in the mysterious manner in which she draws our attention to both in today’s Eucharistic liturgy.

As the first coming opened the way for fallen man’s ascension to the Father, so too, says old Simeon, *“This child is*

set for the fall and resurrection of many in Israel and will be a sign of contradiction.” Through the signs and wonders which Christ performed came also the witness of the Father, Word and the Spirit, by which all men decide for *themselves* their eternal fate. “*Blessed,*” says Jesus to John the Baptist’s followers, “*Blessed is he who is not scandalized in me,*” and later, “*For he that shall be ashamed of me and my words, of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed when He shall come in majesty . . .*”

The whole of this first Sunday of Advent is taken up with our preparation for God’s twofold coming mercy and judgment. What we need to bear in mind today and throughout the next four weeks – and indeed the whole of our lives – *is that the same welcome will be given to us by Our Lord when he comes as Judge, as we give to Him now when He comes to us as Redeemer.*

Let us therefore “cast away the works of darkness” and act as “children of light” through an Advent marked by prayer, fasting, and penance; in short, by a month of ascetic consideration with faces turned to God and not the empty distractions of vain commercialism and hallow entertainment. Certainly this is a season characterized by joy, but *real* preparation for the *real* Christmas requires a sober, confident return to God in repentance for our many and constant sins. By a godly Advent we make ourselves ready not only for Christmas but for that final judgment on which the eternal destiny of our souls depends. May He who is a sign of contradiction be for us, truly, the long-awaited of Israel.

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