

## First Sunday of Advent, Year A

Today marks the beginning of the Church's liturgical Year. Each season has its special grace and today we begin the season of Advent in which we prepare for Christmas and await with expectant longing for God to be born again into our lives, our families, our Church and our world. Saint Augustine summed up the mood of this season well when he prayed: 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you'. Our hearts are made for God. Our souls long for communion with God. During Advent we are meant to taste this restlessness and this longing, to take stock of our lives, to check our direction and to await with expectation the special grace that God promises to offer us at Christmas.

Many of the Advent readings recall the longing of generation after generation of the people of ancient Israel, who experienced a special covenant with God and who longed for the Messiah whom they believed God would send them. We Christians believe that God fulfilled that promise in the person of Mary's child who said to his friends: 'Many have longed to see what you see and never saw it, to hear what you hear and never heard it' (Luke 10:24). Whatever else we might do in preparation for Christmas, let us not forget Jesus' coming. Let us renew our resolve not to be distracted from it by all the razzmatazz that surrounds what has become largely a secular holiday with little or no reference to Jesus.

Other Advent readings focus on our longing for the final coming of Christ in glory. We are advised to avoid useless speculation about the manner and timing of what we customarily refer to as 'the end of the world', but we also know in faith that God has promised 'a renewed creation'. Part of the challenge and privilege of being a human being is to make our contribution to building a better world, a home where human beings can live in dignity and justice, as we nurture each other in love. While we work here to honour the trust Jesus placed in us when he asked us to 'love one another as I have loved you', we know that, ultimately, for us as for Jesus himself, our longing is for the life that is beyond death: the life of communion with God we speak of as 'heaven'. Advent reminds us to look forward to this, for the whole of creation, for ourselves and for those we love, as we prepare and pray for that final personal 'coming of the Lord' at the moment of our death. This longing is beautifully expressed by Saint Ignatius of Antioch who was martyred in the Colosseum in Rome in the early years of the second century.

'He who died for us is all that I seek; he who rose again for us is my whole desire ... Here is one who longs only to be God's; do not delude him with the things of earth. Suffer me to attain to light, pure and undefiled; for only when I am come thither shall I be truly a man. Leave me to imitate the passion of my God. If any of you has God within, understand my longings, and feel for me, because you will know the forces by which I am constrained ... Here am I, yearning for death with all the passion of a lover. Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for things of this earth, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, 'Come to the Father'. There is no pleasure for me in anything that perishes, or in the delights of this life. My heart longs for the bread of God – the flesh of Jesus Christ; and for my drink I crave that blood of his which is undying love.'

Advent reminds us of the past, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem and revealed the wonder of God's love in this world. Advent directs our eyes to the future, to the coming of Jesus in glory to take each of us to himself at the moment of our death and to transform the whole of the

created universe into a place of communion with God. But Advent is primarily about the present. The Church is pleading with us be vigilant to the many ways in which Jesus, through his Spirit, is coming into our lives now, filling our hearts with grace and inviting us to a closer union with God and to a more loving relationship with others. Jesus came with a mission to transform this world by revealing God's loving design and by inviting everyone to join him in responding to the inspiration of God's Spirit to be instruments in this world of God's love. Advent invites us to examine the quality of our commitment to this mission.

So, on this First Sunday of Advent, we might ask: What are my deepest longings? for myself? for those I love? Jesus was obviously able to delight in sinners like us when they gave in to their longing and accepted his invitation to believe, and to cry out for release. The Advent liturgy wants us to focus on this longing and this hope. What role does this yearning have when we come to make decisions about ourselves, about our family, or about the contribution we can make to society? Are there any steps I can take to go beyond habit and routine and to engage myself on a deeper search for communion with God and a more faithful response to God's inspiration? Let us listen to the advice of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, a mystical theologian of the fourth century: 'The person who wants to see God will do so in the very fact of always following Him. The contemplation of God's face is an endless walking towards Him ... There is only one way to grasp the power that transcends all intelligence: not to stop, but to keep always searching beyond what has already been grasped' (*In Canticum Canticorum*, Homily 2,801).

Saint Bernard, a twelfth century Cistercian monk, reminded his contemporaries: 'The psalmist says: "Seek his face always"[Psalm 105:4] ... God is sought with the heart's desire; and when the soul happily finds him its desire is not quenched but kindled. Does the consummation of joy bring about the consuming of desire? Rather it is oil poured upon the flames. Joy will be fulfilled, but there will be no end to desire, and therefore no end to the search. Think, if you can, of this eagerness to see God as not caused by his absence, for he is always present; and think of the desire for God as without fear of failure, for grace is abundantly present' (Sermon 84,2).

In today's First Reading and in the Responsorial Psalm God's people are invited to take their longing to Jerusalem to see the face of God in the temple. Since the time of Jesus we are invited to bring our longing here to the new Jerusalem, the new Temple – the community of Jesus' disciples. For Christ is continually born here in the love we share as we are nourished with the Body of Christ, and as our thirst is quenched at the fountain of the Eucharist.

In the Gospel Jesus tells us to be vigilant. We are to be alert lest he come into our lives and we fail to notice it. The Second Reading is even stronger. Saint Paul tells us that the night is almost over. The light is about to dawn, so we must throw off behaviour that belongs to darkness and prepare to let Christ enlighten us. It was this passage, incidentally, that Saint Augustine read on the night of his conversion. He resolved to take it seriously and to commit himself to 'put on the Lord Jesus' - that is to say to allow grace to transform the whole of his life through communion with Jesus. He resolved to 'walk into the light of the Lord' (Isaiah 2:5 - the final words of today's First Reading). This text played a significant role in the conversion of Saint Augustine.

Is there something I have been putting off? Do I feel called to commit myself more completely to prayer? to love? to service of others as part of the mission of the Church? Do I recognise certain ways of living as being distractions, or forms of self-indulgence that leave my soul

empty? If there are, then why not follow Saint Augustine's example, and give in to my deepest longings, and pray that this Christmas I will be truly open to receive Jesus into my hearts and into my homes. Our hearts are restless till they rest in God. Let us listen to their longing, and make a commitment to respond to God's special grace. The deeper our longing the more God can pour his love into our hearts.