

First Sunday of Advent, Year C

Today we begin a new liturgical year. Though the civil New Year begins on January 1st, the Christian community begins today with a season of preparation for the special coming of Christ into our community at Christmas: the feast on which we celebrate the most momentous moment in human history – the birth over 2000 years ago of Jesus of Nazareth. Each season has its special grace, and the special grace of Advent is to prepare our world, our nation, our city, our home, and our heart, for the one who is always coming to us to heal us and to make this world a sanctuary in which God's loving will is done.

This year we look to Luke, as in today's gospel. Luke has a special perspective on Jesus, for he is the only writer in the New Testament who is not a Jew. His is the perspective of an outsider. For those of you who come from another culture and who sometimes feel like an outsider, and for those of us who, though born here, feel alienated by much of what passes as culture in this land, this is *our* gospel, reminding us that God is for everybody.

In today's world there is no place for a particular people thinking that they alone are God's chosen people. In today's world there is no place for a particular religious group thinking that they alone have the truth and that they have nothing to learn from others. Again and again Luke will focus our reflection on Jesus who reveals God's love to everyone, who honours the Samaritan and the Gentile as well as the Jew, and who calls everyone to welcome, care for, share with and learn from our neighbour – whatever his or her race or religious tradition.

In the First Reading chosen for today's Mass, Jeremiah, a priest and prophet of Judah, reminds his contemporaries of God's promise to anoint someone to come to them and show them the face and the heart of God, fulfilling God's promise to them and the deepest longings of their hearts. He would be anointed in a special way by the chrism of God's Holy Spirit, and so is called 'the Anointed One' (the Christ, Hebrew 'Messiah'). Our thoughts go to Jesus. We are asked to get in touch with our deepest longings and to renew our trust in God who has a special grace for us at his coming, this Christmas.

If we make the Responsorial Psalm our own we will hear ourselves asking God to 'lead me in your truth'. Did not Jesus say that only the truth would set us free? Have we taken paths this past year that have lead us away from the truth? If so, this is a season for a change of heart. Let us seek God's cleansing love in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We will hear ourselves praying: 'For you, O God, I wait, all day long'. When we look back over the past year we may discover that we have been so swept up in the busyness of life that we have lost that sacred space which our soul needs if it is to truly live. Advent is meant to be a time of renewed prayer. We will hear ourselves stating that God makes his covenant known to those who revere Him. Advent is a time to remember the promises God made us when we were conceived, when we were baptised, when we first approached the table of the Eucharist to welcome Jesus into our heart, when we were married, or consecrated in another way, here at the altar of God.

Jeremiah looked forward to the first coming of the Messiah. In today's Second Reading Paul looks forward to another 'coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints'. With our flair for drama and for the big stage, we sometimes imagine this in terms of the end of this creation. For you and me, however, the coming is simpler and closer to home. We think of the greeting of love

that will meet us, please God, when the time of our journey on this earth comes to an end. We would do well to live each day as we would want to have lived when we come to die, and so Saint Paul prays: 'May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another'. Knowing Jesus as he did, and knowing the universal love that God has for everyone, Paul adds: 'May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another *and for all*'.

Jesus himself showed no interest in speculation about the end of the world, and he discouraged such distracting ideas among his disciples. Jesus was, however, concerned with the oppressive Roman occupation of Palestine and with the violence of the freedom fighters who opposed it. He could see the coming conflagration and in the words of today's Gospel, he felt 'the fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world'. The date of publication of Luke's Gospel is debated, but he was writing probably not long after the terrible Jewish-Roman war that reduced Palestine to ashes some thirty years after Jesus' death.

Luke recalls Jesus' words, reminding us that what ultimately matters is to cast our lot in with the one who is called 'the Son of Man', the one who identified with the poor and the oppressed, those whose fidelity to justice and to love God promised to reward with eternal life and a share in divine glory. Whatever the terror that sin might unleash upon us, Jesus wants us, his disciples, to stand tall, filled with hope, for God will be faithful to God's promise.

As we look forward to the coming of Christ this Christmas we would do well to heed Jesus' warning: 'Be on your guard that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life ... Be alert, praying at all times'. The beginning of another year in the life of the Christian community is a grace-filled occasion to reflect on the direction of our lives and to renew our commitment to Jesus and to the life of the Spirit which he inspires in us.

We conclude these reflections on today's liturgy with words from the special blessing that concludes our Mass: 'May God make you steadfast in faith, joyful in hope, and untiring in love all the days of your life'.