

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday Advent Year “C”

December 2, 2012

*As We Wait in Joyful Hope*

Readings: Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2; Luke 21:25-28,34-36

I am not ashamed to admit that Advent might just be my favorite liturgical season of the entire year. I have little doubt that this would raise a few eyebrows amongst those well versed in liturgy, for it is certainly not the most important season of the year. Still, I love Advent and everything about it. This morning we begin the shortest season of the liturgical year, but one that carries with it significant opportunities for spiritual growth. But if we do not enter into the season immediately, the opportunity will be gone before we know it:

Advent has a twofold character: as a season to prepare us for Christmas when Christ’s first coming to us is remembered; as a season when that remembrance directs the mind and heart to await Christ’s Second Coming at the end of time. Advent is thus a period for devout and joyful expectation.” (No. 39, *General Norms*)

Of the four Advent Sundays, it is the first that emphasizes Christ’s second coming, a theme which is sustained throughout the weekdays of the first half of this season. Noting this twofold character, our Holy Father commented on the paradox for Christians: “[O]n the one hand, they raise their eyes towards the final destination of their pilgrimage through history, which is the glorious return of the Lord Jesus; on the other, remembering with emotion his birth in Bethlehem, they kneel before the Crib. The hope of Christians is directed to the future, but always remains well rooted in a past event.” [Pope Benedict XVI, I Advent 2005 Angelus]

But there is more! Besides these two comings of Christ mentioned specifically in the liturgy, the great abbot St. Bernard of Clairvaux added a third, an invisible one in his preaching, that which comes in the soul of believers and is dropped as a bridge between the first

and the last. “Because this coming lies between the other two, it is like a road on which we travel from the first coming to the last. In the first, Christ was our redemption; in the last, he will appear as our life; in this middle coming, he is our rest and consolation.”

(Sermo 5, In Adventu Domini, 1-3: Opera Omnia, Edit. Cisterc. 4 {1966}, 188-190)

Obviously, these were personal reflections of the abbot, and only the two comings of Christ have been spoken of in the Church’s doctrine, but St. Bernard was making a spiritual point. The middle coming of the Lord is in our hearts, in the depths of our own souls, each time that we draw close to the Lord in prayer, He is there in our midst, most especially through the Word of God. This was his point- the Word of God is real, active and powerful, dwelling in us.

Thus we have been given time, precious time really, to watch and wait, to hope, to remain vigilant. Vigilance in the spiritual life is made more difficult precisely because our society anticipates the full joy of Christmas without the necessary preparation. So how exactly do we prepare ourselves for the Savior to dwell in our souls?

One tangible way to prepare ourselves this Advent is through the daily reading of Sacred Scripture. It is not as much the amount of Scripture that we read, as much as the habit of reading something each day. The prophet Isaiah is especially recommended, but equally recommended are the daily readings for Mass. The Lectionary is its own self-guided mini-retreat. That same reflection from Saint Bernard also offered practical advice with respect to the Scriptures:

Keep God’s word in this way. Let it enter into your very being, let it take possession of your desires and your whole way of life. Feed on goodness, and your soul will delight in its richness. Remember to eat your bread, or your heart will wither away. Fill your soul with richness and strength.

By reminding ourselves of the final coming of Christ, we keep the whole picture before our eyes. We, the People of God, give a collective voice to our waiting through this vitally important yet brief season of Advent. In turn, the Church guides along the right path all of good will who make this daily journey in hope, and she offers rich traditions to help us along the way.

Through the use of Advent Wreaths, Advent Calendars readings and prayers at home, your families too can mark this sacred time in a most fruitful manner. I'll give credit where it is due. The earliest calendars originated from German Lutherans, and the custom quickly spread. They serve as some of my best memories growing up, including arguing about whose turn it was to open the next window! I loved the Advent Calendar. I urge you to use these beautiful customs in your own family prayer at home. They exist to mark Sacred Time in a special way.

The origin of the Advent Wreath is more uncertain. There is evidence of pre-Christian Germanic peoples using wreathes with lit candles during the cold and dark December days as a sign of hope in the future warm and extended-sunlight days of Spring. Regardless, it was easily adapted from pagan culture and Christianized by highlighting the Scriptural belief that Christ is the Light of the World, and with each week of Advent, the light builds in intensity.

We begin therefore this new Advent, a time given to us by the Lord of Time, reawakening in our hearts the longing for His reign of Peace and Justice. By combining our hope filled expectation with a period of penitential preparation, we will not be caught off guard. Rather, as we pray at Mass each Sunday, **“we may be always free from sin and safe from all distress, as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”**