

1st Sunday Advent Year “A” *Jesus Christ, our true hope.*
Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matt. 24:37-44
November 30-December 1, 2019

Advent has a twofold character, for it is a time of preparation for the Solemnities of Christmas, in which the First Coming of the Son of God to humanity is remembered, and likewise a time when, by remembrance of this, minds and hearts are led to look forward to Christ’s Second Coming at the end of time. For these two reasons, Advent is a period of devout and expectant delight.¹

A key aspect to this season is one of hope, the predominant virtue reflected in the readings and the very nature of the season. The Church wisely orders the liturgical seasons to reflect important themes, distinguishing the seasons with a special character, even as we continue to live our daily lives in the midst of the world. Hope is an indispensable companion of faith.

In one of only three encyclicals he issued while Pope, Benedict XVI chose one to be on the theme of hope. It was entitled *Spe Salvi*, translated as “[We were] saved by hope.” [Rom. 8:24] He discusses at length the connection between faith and hope, noting that “The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.”² Do we indeed live differently because of hope?

Isaiah spoke of things to come in his prophecy concerning Judah and Jerusalem. His vision of a peaceful world in which the swords shall be beaten into plowshares surely demands hope and contains a promise of the source of that hope. It was to come from Judah and Jerusalem. We Christians forget the amount of waiting that had to occur for this prophecy to come true—seven centuries! So, when he finally came, Christians saw this as fulfillment of sacred time itself.

¹ General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar, #39

² Pope Benedict XVI, encyclical letter *Spe Salvi*, paragraph #2. 30 November 2007

The virtue of hope allows us to wait more patiently for the promised results to take place. Our lives are to be lived with the certainty of hope, and Advent is the season *par excellence* of this hope. Again, from that encyclical: “Faith is not merely a personal reaching out towards things to come that are still totally absent: it gives us something... Faith draws the future into the present, so that it is no longer simply a “not yet”.³

Our Gospel starkly reminds us that we need to be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come. This hits home particularly hard for me, as I learned just two hours ago that a dear friend of mine, Bishop Paul Sirba of Duluth, originally a priest of this Archdiocese, died suddenly of a heart attack. I am stunned. He was one of the holiest– no, I’ll say it– he was the holiest priest I have ever known. This is a huge loss for the Diocese of Duluth, as they lost their beloved Shepherd. We offer our prayers. I traveled with him in October for a week, retracing some of his family history in the Czech Republic along with his brother Fr. Joe, a priest of Duluth. I spoke with him on Thanksgiving Day. He was prepared, he was always prepared to serve the Lord, and he did so with humility, kindness and joy.

The encyclical calls us to see this hope in its communal aspect. Our individual hopes are linked to a lived union with others. If we together cannot be the vessels of hope for the world, who else will step up? The First Sunday of Advent calls us to look beyond both the present moment and Christmas morning. We look to the fulfillment of all time through Christ.

So often we think to ourselves, “If I just had this or could achieve that, I know I will be happy.” The question fundamentally is this: “What will make us happy?” This new liturgical year gives us the opportunity to engage this question.

³ Ibid, paragraph #7.

Our second reading this morning was the exact passage to which Saint Augustine turned when he heard the voice of the children in the garden saying, “Take up and read.” He randomly opened the Bible, and this is the first passage he saw. His own sin and promiscuity, while well in the past by age 30, still lingered in his mind. But this very passage spoke to him when he most needed it.

Throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Like so many, he searched for happiness before it dawned on him through grace that true happiness is not found in a thing, but in a person. Augustine would spend the rest of his life living for others.

As we patiently wait this Advent season, let us be spurred on by hope, immersed in joyful expectation that our salvation is near at hand, trusting that God’s promises will be fulfilled.