

First Sunday of Advent (C)

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Ps 24

1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2

Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

There will be signs in the sun and moon and stars; on earth nations in agony, bewildered by the clamour of the ocean and its waves; men dying of fear as they await what menaces the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken.

I imagine this is not what most folks would expect to hear at the beginning of a season that leads up to Christmas! Jesus is warning us about the end of the world – the sun and moon darkened; the earth, shaking, falling back into the waves; human governments and societies in chaos. This is hardly seems to be an image of the peace, hope, or joy that we associate with our celebration of Advent.

So, what are we to we make of all of this? Why is this offered to us on the first day of our Church year? I think a clue can be found within the prayers of today's Mass.

It's easy to allow these prayers to wash over us with little understanding of what they mean. And to be fair, they are often rather dense translations of the original Latin prayers that are centuries old, and they often contain images and turns of phrase that are no longer familiar to us. But listen, for instance, to the prayer that we will pray after Holy Communion today:

May these mysteries, O Lord, in which we have participated, profit us, we pray, for even now, as we walk amid passing things, you teach us by them to love the things of heaven and hold fast to what endures.

So, there's a lot packed in there, but consider this line: "as we walk amid passing things, you teach us by them to love the things of heaven." To me, that's the take-away message of our Gospel in a nutshell.

Because the things of this earth are indeed passing away. Nothing in our life or in our experience is permanent or fixed. Our jobs, our homes, our families – all the good things of this world are temporary. Nothing in this life *lasts* forever, and no one *lives* forever. Even the stars in the sky will not always shine as they do today; countries, nations, and the worldly institutions that define our lives will all eventually fall apart.

So where does this leave us? We cannot deny we yearn for something eternal – something that we can love which will never betray us, abandon us, or leave us. So it's fair to ask: why do we have such a desire in our hearts unless there is something that can fulfil it?

In the words of our prayer today, God teaches us to *love the things of heaven and hold fast to what endures*. God alone lasts forever – there is no constant or enduring force in the universe except the Lord who created it. In him we place our trust, because he alone is holy, lasting, and perfect.

That does not mean that the things of this world are bad, simply because they fall short of God's perfection. Listen again to the words of the prayer: God *teaches us by passing things*—that is, *in and through* the things of this world—to *love the things of heaven*. All the good things of this life find purpose and meaning when we see them in relation to God, and when we realise that God created them, not for us to hold them up as substitutes for God, but so that they might bring us closer to him.

And this, I would argue, is a very fitting message for this time of year. For the next month, we will all be bombarded with advertising, and promised products to fill needs that we never knew existed. We are surrounded by a consumerism that reaches its fever-pitch precisely as we pause to celebrate God's coming among us in absolute poverty. Jesus was born on the run, in a cold, dark cave with a feeding trough for a bed – and everything around us tries to get us to commemorate this with an endless stream of purchasing.

That said, the celebrations, decorations, and activities of this season *can* be of value to us... *if* we see them as a way to direct our attention to where it belongs – to the coming of Christ and to the hopeful season of waiting that we inaugurate today.

But we can only do that if we allow some time to reflect on the eternal realities that God desires to teach us this Advent. So do your best to tone down the stress and the frenzy, and heed the words of the Gospel: do not let the festivities and celebrations make you *drowsy and unaware* of where God is leading you. Do not let the *anxieties of daily life* allow the coming of Christ to *catch you by surprise like a trap*. Carve out a time to enter into an Advent spirit of patient expectation, and don't let yourself get carried away by what's happening outside the doors of this church, where advertisers and marketers just want to use you to make a quick dollar.

Instead, the Church invites us to treat this season like a gentler version of Lent – not a time to fast from food or abstain from meat, necessarily, but a season to fast from distraction and abstain from the temptations that the world throws our way. We are invited to allow this to be a time when we reconnect with what truly matters: a time to learn, and a time to listen. Christ invites us on an Advent pilgrimage – a journey to Bethlehem where he will teach us to love the eternal things of Heaven more than the passing things of this earth; he desires to break through the chaos of our lives and enter into our hearts with *power and great glory*.

The Opening Prayer of today's Mass begged God to give us *the resolve to run forth to meet Christ with righteous deeds at his coming*. This is what we should ask for during Advent – the grace to fire up our souls with longing for God and the resolve to put that

desire into action. Don't just sit back and let valuable time of preparation pass you by; *run forth!*

And so I think that we need to decide to do something practical. In the quiet time after Communion today, I invite you to reflect on something that you can do to make this Advent a time of spiritual preparation for Christmas.

There are many things you can do. Of course, we have our parish Advent prayer groups. Alternatively, we have the Advent prayer journals and booklets, with which you can follow the readings for each day's liturgy and reflect on them for five or ten minutes. Or perhaps you can get into the habit of praying the Rosary every day, recalling the events of Christ's life and asking God to come into your own life. Maybe you can pledge to spend some time every week in some activity that will bring you closer to other people in our parish and closer to God. If you have younger children, this might be a good time to gather together for family prayer – to light the candles of an Advent wreath in your home, for example. Or maybe you can simply put aside a few dollars every week, money you might have otherwise spent on some non-essential purchase, and donate that money to those in need.

Above all, may this Advent be a time of real spiritual preparation for what we celebrate on Christmas. May we quiet our hearts, find peace in our days, and listen attentively to the Lord. May those words we heard from Saint Paul in our second reading resonate in your hearts this Advent:

May the Lord be generous in increasing your love and make you love one another and the whole human race as much as we love you. And may he so confirm your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless in the sight of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus Christ comes with all his saints.