

First Sunday of Advent—Year C

Jeremiah 33.14-16

1 Thessalonians 3.12-4.2

Luke 21.25-28. 34-36

The Readings from the First Sunday of Advent seem to be set-up to disappoint us. What I mean by that is, on the Thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time, we heard passages describing Jesus' second coming proclaimed, presented in apocalyptic language. This apocalyptic language is accompanied by frightening images of war, desolation and end-time events like the falling of stars and darkening of other heavenly bodies.

So, when we come to the First Sunday of Advent, which is the beginning not only of a new liturgical season, but also of a new liturgical year, we thought that we would be putting these apocalyptic images from scripture behind us.

But what do we find instead?

Today's passage from the Gospel of Luke seems to easily segue from the end times passage from the Gospel of Mark two Sundays ago because it is very similar in style and message. We were hoping for a different message—a sweet, consoling message that anticipated the Solemnity of Christmas, a comforting passage relating the arrival of the baby Jesus.

So what's going on here?

Today's Sunday Gospel Reading is reminding us that we cannot understand—let alone appreciate—Jesus' first arrival without first understanding and appreciating his eventual second arrival. We assume that Advent, which means "coming" or "arrival", is all about his first coming, his incarnation as a new-born infant. However, Advent is also about his second coming at the end of time and history. We needed his first arrival, his being born like one of us so that, as one of us in the fullness of his humanity, he might save our humanity through the perfect sacrifice of himself for sin. But this salvation event does not end here. Following this salvation event, he then establishes us as members of his mystical body, the Church, so that men and women of all times, places and peoples will receive the status and inheritance as adopted children of God, made so through Christ Jesus.

His second coming will bring this inheritance to its fulfillment. So, we can rightfully say that Jesus' first coming takes second place to his second coming, because his second coming will fulfil and complete God the Father's plan for him and us.

That is the broad vision that is presented to us at the beginning of the Advent season. The ending is revealed before we discover, through the rest of the Advent Season, the beginning details of how God the Father will bring his plan for human salvation about. That will be presented in the following weeks of this season.

I've used this image before to describe the purpose of the Advent Season, and it deserves repeating. Think of Advent like looking through a telescope or a pair of binoculars. When first looking through these instruments, one often first perceives a very blurry image. After adjusting the lenses, however, the image becomes clearer and sharper. Advent is like that. We begin the season with a general call to be prepared, then when we gradually discover the people, time and place that will play a part in God the Father's plan for human salvation as they come into sharper focus.

The First reading, drawn from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, offers us an important clue as to whom we are preparing for. Chapters 30 to 33 from the Book of Jeremiah are known as the "Book of Consolation" or the "Book of Comfort". While Jeremiah prophesied about the defeat of Judea and the destruction of Jerusalem, a prophecy that was fulfilled in 586 BC, at the hands of the Chaldeans, Chapters 30-33 are an exception to this message of imminent doom. The Book of Consolation offers a very hopeful message about the future—one that goes beyond the defeat and destruction of Judea and Jerusalem. Jeremiah describes one who is described as a "righteous branch" from David, an image that requires a little explanation.

In the First Book of Kings, one of the Old Testament's history books, the Prophet Samuel was sent by God to Bethlehem to anoint a new King for Israel. He had already anointed Saul to be King, but Saul showed himself to be unworthy of Kingship. Samuel then simply went out to anoint someone else to be King. He encountered Jesse, the father of David, and anointed his son David to be King. King David reigned for 40 years, with his son Solomon inheriting his Kingship after King David's death. This royal line would continue until Judea was conquered by the Chaldeans in 586 BC.

The prophet Nathan had told King David in a prophecy that his kingly line would continue **forever**, a word that he uses twice (2 Samuel 7.16). This is a very audacious prophecy, given that no kingly line on earth goes on forever. Considering the seeming extinction of David's kingly line in 586 BC, it appears the prophet Nathan proclaimed a false prophecy. David's line did not last forever. It had been, metaphorically, cut down, leaving only a stump.

The "righteous branch" of David is related to another Old Testament image—the Stump of Jesse, a metaphorical image of a kingly line that is no more. But we know that a stump can still be a living thing. Sap can still be found moving through the stump, and shoots can still grow out of its roots. Jeremiah is saying that Nathan's prophecy is not false, that David's royal line will go on forever. A Branch will grow out of the stump, and that branch will inherit David's kingly line and hold it forever. This prophecy, coming from the Book of Consolation, is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is a descendent of King David through Joseph, his foster-father. Through Jesus, we have an eternal King.

The scripture scholar John Bergsma, describes what this King brings:

"The arrival of this King will bring peace to the people of God: "Judah shall be safe, and Jerusalem shall dwell secure. This was not fulfilled in a political sense, but an interior sense. The messiah came and formed "The Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). The peace he gave to the people was the most important kind of peace of all, peace with God." John Bergsma then quotes the following passage from *St. Paul's Letter to the Romans*: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God" (Rom. 5:12)."

This morning's passage from the Gospel of Luke warns against two wrong-minded ways to anticipate the second arrival of the Lord—dissipation and fear. John Bergsma also warns us to avoid these two ways when he says "The great danger for disciples of Jesus is that we get sidetracked while waiting for the return of the Lord and fail either in temperance or fortitude. Failure of temperance is to give into "drowsing, carousing and drunkenness," to make the pursuit of physical pleasure the primary goal of one's life. Failure of fortitude is to succumb to "the anxieties of daily life". The struggle of the Christian life is to capitulate neither to

fear nor pleasure as we wait for our Lord to return to us.” We need both temperance to curtail our inordinate pursuit of pleasure and courage to meet the Lord, standing strong with heads held high as the Gospel reading reminds us.

Jesus describes himself as “the Son of Man coming in a cloud”. If that phrase sounds familiar, it’s because it was also found in last Sunday’s First Reading from the Book of Daniel. In that passage, the Son of Man receives from the one called ‘the Ancient of Days’ (God the Father) “dominion and glory and kingship that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him” (Daniel 7.13- 14). We realize that this ‘Son of Man’ is the same as the ‘Son of David’ because a universal kingdom was promised to both. In the second Psalm, the following passage is found: “I will tell of the decrees of the Lord: He said to me “You are my son...Ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession”. In Psalm 89, which celebrates God’s covenant with King David, we find the following sentences: “You are my Father, my God and the Rock of my salvation. I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the Kings of the earth” (Psalm 89.25-27). Jesus is both the Son of Man and the “righteous Branch of David” promised in the First Reading.

In conclusion, the second coming of the Lord is of more importance than the first, for the first exists to make the second arrival of the Lord possible. Between the first coming of the Lord, which has happened, and the second coming of the Lord, which has yet to happen, we have this graced time in salvation history. This is the time to, with God’s help, re-assess our lives and, if need be, re-adjust our lives so that they better reflect our status as citizens of the Kingdom of God. We wait for his second coming, not in fear, anxiety and dissipation, but with heads high and standing erect, for we are not waiting, ill-prepared for judgement, but for one who is our saviour and brother.