A REFLECTION AND GUIDE TO ASSIST US IN

OUR JOURNEY THROUGH THE HOLY SEASON OF ADVENT



INTRODUCTION

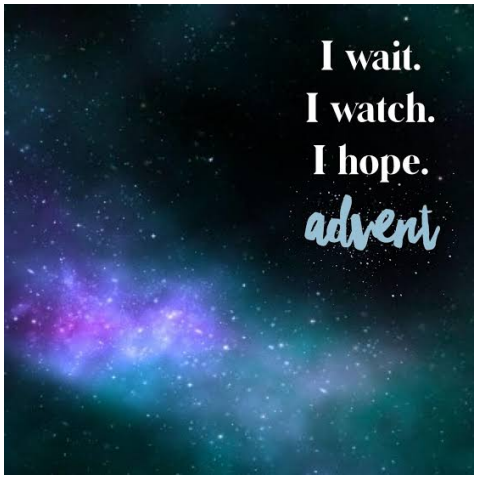
It is hard to believe but, once again, we are beginning our short season of Advent, when we prepare for the *advent* or the coming of our Lord. Incidentally, this year our season is nearly as long it can be, with almost a week between the Fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve. Hopefully, this means that we have a bit more time to prepare for the coming of our Lord! In our Season we prepare, of course, for Jesus' coming to us at Christmas; what is usually called the *first coming* of Christ. However, we should also think of His *final coming* at the end of time or, as we say in the Creed at Mass, "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." In fact, our liturgical season of Advent reflects this sense of a two-fold coming of Jesus. For the first few weeks of Advent, we are invited to focus on the second coming of Jesus Christ at the end of time and what this means for us here and now. Only as we get close to Christmas do we then really turn our attention to his first coming at Christmas, especially as we enter the last week of Advent, that is from the 17th December onwards.

Many spiritual writers, such as St. Bernard, reflect that in between the Lord's first coming at Christmas and last coming at the end of time, there is something of a "third coming". What does St. Bernard mean? Jesus in fact comes to us in many ways every day: in prayer, in people and events, in the Sacred Scriptures and, of course, in the Eucharist. As members of the Church, we can think especially of how our Lord comes to us, often in the sick and those in need. Advent then, is very much a time when we focus both on Jesus' coming to us in all these many ways and on His presence among us at every time and in every moment of our lives.

Advent is also very much like a journey and, like any good journey, we not only have a destination in mind (the coming of Jesus), but also we employ a map (or even a GPS!) to get us there. Advent

does indeed follow a route or a plan and it has a structure for each Sunday. This greatly assists us to journey well through the season. Each Sunday is like a milepost, or a road sign, on that journey; pointing us in the right direction, as we prepare for the coming of the Lord. With this in mind, our reflection uses this pattern of the four Sundays of Advent. If you wish, you might want to have the reflection somewhere to hand throughout the season, in order to help you prepare for the coming of our Lord.

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT: WATCH AND WAIT!



The theme or milepost for the first Sunday of Advent is *to watch and wait for the Lord*. For many of us, it is a timely reminder that as Christians, we need to be like Mary as well as Martha in the Gospels (cf. Luke 10: 38-42). We may recall that Martha was so busy with tasks that she did not have time to listen to Jesus, whereas Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened to him. So often, we too need to slow down and listen to the Lord, to sit at his feet for a while, even if it is just for five minutes a day! We may feel that we are too busy to pray, especially at this frantic time of the year with all those preparations and activities. It is worth remembering what Saint Mother Teresa of Kolkata often said: "If I am really busy then I need to pray twice as hard…and twice as long!"

There is also a danger that we feel watching and waiting is somehow wasting time and energy. It goes against the grain to watch and to wait. We get frustrated when a traffic light turns red, and the yellow light is seen invitation to put the foot down hard on the accelerator, rather than to slow down. We get impatient waiting in line at a store: after all, we have a long list of errands to run and time is money. Then there are all those instant makeover programs on the TV. Yes, watching and waiting may not be among our strong points! Yet, watching and waiting on the Lord will not be time wasted. Furthermore, some things just cannot and should not be hurried; time is essential

for a true spiritual maturing and revealing to take place. In fact, watching and waiting is necessary, and even vital, for our spiritual growth. As St. John Chrysostom observed many centuries ago: "We are not simply to believe, but to watch; not simply to love, but to watch; not simply to obey, but to watch…true Christians, whoever they are, watch…and inconsistent Christians do not."

This time of year is so very busy at school, at home and at work and all those shopping days to Christmas are disappearing rapidly! The Church wisely gives us this special season of Advent to help us in all this busyness to prepare for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ. So, let us use this time well, let us journey through Advent well and let us prepare well, so that as the Lord comes to us, we may have hearts and minds open and ready to welcome him. In this wonderful season of hope, let us echo the final words of the last book in the New Testament: "*maranatha*, Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22: 20).

THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT: “PREPARE A WAY FOR THE LORD”



For the Second Sunday of Advent, we encounter one of those great Advent figures, namely St. John the Baptist. In him, we see and hear the second sign, or marker, on our journey. St. John the Baptist commands us to, “…prepare a way for the Lord…make straight his paths” (Mark 1: 1-8). It was certainly the mission of St. John the Baptist to do just that: to prepare a way for the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ. However, even though Jesus has come, St. John’s message still has great value and we too have a mission to prepare a way for the Lord. Origen, a Third-Century writer, explained this well: “I think the mystery of John is still being carried out in the world. If we are to believe in Jesus Christ, the spirit and power of John must first come into our hearts and prepare for the Lord a perfect people, making the rough ways of our heart smooth and making the crooked straight.” So, *what* does all this mean and *how* are we to do it…?

The answer lies in those two words, “prepare” and “way”. Let us take a closer look at that first word “prepare”. If we think about it, we spend quite a bit of our life in preparing for all sorts of things, whether it is for a mid-term exam or quiz, or the next sporting event, or for a visitor, or family event such as a new baby or an anniversary, to give just a few examples. How do we do this? It may involve study or practice: sharpening up our knowledge, skills and awareness. It could involve preparing the house for visitors by cleaning up, or getting a guest room ready, or cooking ahead of time. It might also mean pausing and reflecting: preparing mentally and spiritually for the task or project or event ahead.

These images easily can be translated into how we prepare in a spiritual sense, most especially so that we will recognize Jesus when he comes. When He comes, we then welcome him and let him enter into our hearts. As with our everyday preparations (whatever these may be), all this involves effort and focus. We might need to sharpen up our faith knowledge and spiritual skills, helped by the sacraments, God’s Word and our prayer time. It might also require that we clean up our house (that is our heart and soul) in some way, perhaps helped by celebrating the sacrament of

reconciliation. It will certainly mean spending time in prayer and reflection. Therefore, Advent really is a special time, when we can be energized and prepare for the coming of the Lord.

So far, so good, but we also need to look at that second word "way." The phrase "prepare a way for the Lord" also has the image of a *way* or a *journey*. It reminds us that the Lord journeys to us. However, what if that way or road to us is blocked somehow; what if there is something blocking God's path to us? As our Gospel puts it, do we need to "make straight" the path of the Lord to us? For this reason, Advent, as with Lent, is a season of preparation and part of this preparation is conversion and penance. This is one reason why we use the liturgical color of violet/purple both for Lent and for Advent…it is the color of penance and of renewed conversion. As part of preparations, we need to take a serious look at what might be "blocking" or making crooked our relationship with God and, with God's help, to make sure that that blockages or those obstacles are removed. It could be a familiar fault or failing, or a less than active or vibrant prayer life, or a long held resentment or hurt. Any of these, and so many more, can act like road blocks: a barrier for us to be open and welcoming to the Lord as He comes to us. As members of the Order, let us make an effort to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation at some stage during Advent so that, through God's grace, all those barriers and obstacle to following the Lord may be removed.

St. John the Baptist was a remarkable figure, not least in where he lived and how he dressed. Unlike him, we do not need to live in the desert, or to dress in camel skin clothes, or to live on a diet of honey and locusts (although this could be the latest diet fad…who knows?)! However, we do need to "prepare a way for the Lord", both for ourselves and, to help others to do the same. May the Lord bless us and help us as we, and our families and friends, prepare a way for God. As that well-known hymn puts it:

Hark, a herald voice is calling,

"Christ is nigh", it seems to say;

"Cast away the dreams of darkness,

O you children of the day."

THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT: REJOICE!



As our Advent reflection so far has shown us, with each week of Advent we are given markers or signs, to guide us through this season and so to help us prepare for the coming of Jesus. We have had the two spiritual guides of "watching and waiting" and of "preparing a way for the Lord". Our signpost, or guide, for the third week is a simple and yet potentially difficult message: *rejoice, for the Lord is near!* Today, we celebrate "Gaudete" or "rejoicing" Sunday, echoing the first words of the entrance antiphon for the Mass. We are to rejoice, because the coming of our Lord and Savior is near. This theme of rejoicing is marked in our readings and our prayers at the Mass. Even the liturgical color reflects this theme. We have the option of using rose-colored vestments and Advent Wreath candle (rose being a mix of the purple of Advent and the white of Christmas).

In fact, the word "joy" occurs many times in the Sacred Scriptures in both the Old and the New Testaments. However, it is not always an easy word to understand, yet alone to live. We think of all those suffering through war, violence or injustices in so many places. It can be hard to be joyful, if we are experiencing loss, or hurt, or a crisis in our lives. Joy can also seem to be something fleeting or even superficial, or frustratingly elusive. When, as Christians, we speak of joy (rather like other everyday words such as "love", or "peace", or "freedom") we need to recall that the word has a very particular biblical and spiritual meaning for us.

In our Second Reading at Mass for the Third Sunday of Advent (1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24), St. Paul says, "rejoice always." Indeed, the word "joy" occurs twenty-two times in the letters of St. Paul. He does not say this lightly, or as a tired cliché. We may recall that St. Paul personally suffered much for preaching and living the Gospel. We should not think that his life was some gentle voyage, with blue skies, white fluffy clouds and a chorus of angels singing in the background! In one of his letters, he even lists all his sufferings for the sake of the Gospel (cf. 2 Corinthians 11: 16-33). He asks us to rejoice in hope, in repentance, in salvation and even in suffering. So, what does he mean and what exactly is Christian joy…?

The Christian understanding of joy certainly does not mean pretending all is fine, or of putting on a happy face, or fixed smile, when all is not well. The word used for "joy" in the New Testament is *chairete* and it is actually a word with many meanings and levels. To name a few of these, it first means a profound and real sense of God's love for us. It also means a great feeling of trust and confidence in God, so that whatever happens, we have His love and care. Christian joy then is not something superficial, nor as Bernard Bassett remarked is it "contingent", that is depending on things going well, or on circumstances, or on others. Rather, joy is a gift that we must choose to accept, and an inner peace and strength that is there regardless of life and its ups and downs

Christian joy is also a spiritual way of living and seeing ourselves, others and the world, so that we are tuned into God's will. As Abbot Marmion wrote, "joy is the very echo of God's life within us." In this sense, joy is certainly an attitude to life and a spiritual gift. It is also eminently practical; especially when, with God's help, we try to develop spiritual values and a way of everyday living that are what we might call joy-giving, rather than joy-killing. A great exercise during this third week of our Advent journey might be to strengthen all those things that, spiritually speaking, bring us joy and to root out those attitudes or values in our life that we know are joy-killers. Wryly, we might also remember that, as disciples of the Lord, we should indeed be joyful…!

As we hear in the Gospel for the Third Sunday of Advent (John 1: 6-8, 19-28), when St. John the Baptist is asked "who are you then?" he proclaims that he is not the Christ. He then goes on to say that the one who is coming after him is so much greater than him. We can rejoice because that "greater one", Jesus Christ comes to us. As we come closer to Christmas and everything will seem so busy, whether at work, or school, or with all those Christmas preparations at home, let us take to heart and to truly live the words prayed at Mass today: "we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our, Jesus Christ."

THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT: THE LORD IS NEAR!



Entering the fourth and final week of our season of Advent, our journey and our preparations for the "advent' of the Lord will soon be coming to an end. At least this year, we have nearly a full week before Christmas Eve. That being stated, it is hard to believe that Christmas is nearly here, although the excitement levels (especially with our children, grandchildren, nephews or nieces) and the heightened sense of expectation are certainly obvious. Not surprisingly, the prayers, music and readings at the Mass for the Fourth Sunday of Advent also have this atmosphere of breathless anticipation. The Prayer after Communion sums up those thoughts and feelings well:

> …We pray Almighty God,
>
> that as the feast day of our salvation draws ever nearer,
>
> so we may press forward all the more eagerly
>
> to the worthy celebration of the mystery of your Son's Nativity.

One of the unique features of the liturgy during the last week of the season of Advent is the singing or reading of what are called the great "O antiphons" as heard in our Advent carol, "O Come, O come Emmanuel." Each of these short antiphons, or prayers, describes the nature of the Messiah and his coming. One speaks of the Messiah as the wisdom and holy Word of God, who governs all creation with strong, yet tender care. Another sings of the Messiah as the radiant dawn, splendor of eternal light, who shines on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death. Perhaps the most familiar O Antiphon describes the Messiah as Emmanuel (God with us), king and lawgiver, desire of the nations, Savior of all people who comes to set us free. A great spiritual exercise during this fourth week of Advent is to look at that Advent carol and spend a little bit of time in prayer reflecting on what each of the descriptions says and what they might mean.

At the Mass on the Fourth Sunday, our Gospel is always about one of the "annunciations" or announcements that are made in preparation for the coming of the Messiah (yes, in a way, there is more than one annunciation Gospel!). As we are in Year B of our three-year cycle, this time around

we hear the most familiar annunciation: the annunciation of the archangel Gabriel to Mary. In Year A, we would read about the angel of the Lord appearing to St. Joseph in a dream and telling him to take Mary for his wife. Next year (Year C), we will have the Gospel of the Visitation, when Mary goes to meet her kinswoman Elizabeth. She recognizes the mother of her Lord and St. John the Baptist leaps for joy in his mother's womb: both therefore announcing that the Messiah is near.

These wonderful annunciation Gospels are not only about the events that led up to the birth of Jesus at Christmas. They also invite us to think about our *response* to this annunciation of the good news of salvation. Like our Blessed Mother, we can and should enter into a prayerful dialogue with the Lord ("how can this be…?") and then say "yes" to what God asks of us: "be it done to me according to your word" (cf. Luke 1: 38). Like St. Joseph, we can be open to God's messengers, however they may come to us and to respond to those messages as St. Joseph did in love and obedience: "he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him" (Matthew 1: 24). Like the Gospel of the Visitation, we can imitate Mary, who was blessed because she believed what was spoken to her by the Lord would be fulfilled and because her soul magnified the Lord (cf. Luke 1: 41-46). We can also be like Elizabeth, who was open to being filled with the Holy Spirit so that she then recognized the presence of God (Luke 1: 41-43).

Once the season of Christmas comes upon us, let us indeed give great thanks for the coming of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Let us remember that our celebrations are ultimately about who Jesus is and what Jesus came and did for us. Indeed, Christmas and Easter are closely bound together. The Opening Prayer for the Mass on the Fourth Sunday puts it so well:

> Pour forth we beseech you O Lord, your grace into our hearts;
>
> that we to whom the incarnation of Christ, your Son
>
> was made known by the message of an angel,
>
> may by his Passion and Cross, be brought to the glory of his Resurrection

Prayers and blessings to you, your family and friends as we enter this sacred time of Christmas. May we always be open to the loving presence of our Lord, especially as we celebrate Emmanuel, God with us!

Very Rev Msgr. Anthony M. Barratt, STL, PhD, VF, ChM