

FROM THE PASTOR'S



First Sunday of Advent November 30, 2008 B

OUR NEW LITURGICAL YEAR BEGINS WITH AN ADVENT CALL TO WAKE UP

Welcome to a new *Church Year*. In the life of our church calendar, each new *Liturgical Year* begins on the first Sunday of Advent.

The *Liturgical Year* is the way our church *celebrates, relives and makes present* to us, Christ and the main events in his life. It is the way that our church keeps placing before us the story of Jesus.

The **Catechism of the Catholic Church** tells us: "*We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus' life and his mysteries...*". So through the ebb and flow of each liturgical year, we seek, with the guidance of our church, to live and internalize the events of Christ's life.

Two Main Seasons

Nature has four seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter. Our church year has two main seasons: the *Advent-Christmas* season and the *Lent-Easter* season. *Christmas* celebrates the Incarnation of Jesus, God becoming one of us. *Easter* celebrates the Death and Resurrection of Christ. Each season has a time of *preparation*. We prepare for the Feast of the Incarnation with four weeks of *Advent*. We prepare for the *Sacred-Triduum* (Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Vigil) with 40 days of *Lent*. Both events (the Incarnation and our Redemption) have an *extended period* of celebration. We don't just celebrate Christ's coming on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. We celebrate it for *twelve days*, culminating with the *Feast of the Baptism of Jesus*. In a similar way, we do not just celebrate Christ's Resurrection on Easter Sunday. We celebrate it for the *Fifty Days* of Easter, culminating with the Feast of Pentecost. Wrapped around the two main seasons of the year are 34 Sundays in *Ordinary Time*.

Advent Season

During the four weeks of Advent, our church calls us to focus on the comings of Christ: his First Coming in the flesh 2,000 years ago, his Second Coming at the

end of time, and his daily comings to us during these in-between time. During Advent, we *remember* with gratitude the First Coming of Christ which led to our redemption. We await and look forward to his Second Coming and, during these in-between times, we are called to be constantly on the *alert* for his comings in the *events and encounters* of our daily lives.

First Readings

During the Advent season, our first readings are mostly from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah wonderfully articulated the longing of his people for God to re-enter their lives. The Book of Isaiah has three parts to it: Chapters 1-39 were written *prior* to Israel's exile in Babylon.

Chapters 40-55 were written *during* the time of Israel's exile.

Chapters 56-66 were written *after* Israel returned from exile to a land and Temple that had been devastated by war.

This Sunday's reading is taken from the *post-exilic period* when the Israelites struggled to rebuild their lives and Temple. The verses we listened to today were written in the form of a *lament*. Isaiah is verbalizing his people's sadness over their past misdeeds. He also gives voice to their sense of the absence of God from their lives and the desire for him to come visit them. Let us listen to what Isaiah had to say to his grieving and struggling people. Speaking for his people, Isaiah asks:

*Why do you let us wander, O Lord, from your ways
and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?*

Notice the tendency to blame God for their wrongdoing just as Eve blamed the serpent. But, later on in the reading, the people recognize their wrongdoing:

*Would that you would meet us doing right,
that we were mindful of your ways!
Behold, you are angry and we are sinful;
all of us have become like unclean people.*

It takes courage and humility for us to admit our wrong- doing and to take full responsibility for it. It is so easy for us to place the blame elsewhere. Then the lament gives expression to the people's sense of the absence of God from their lives:

*There is none who calls upon your name
for you have hidden your face from us.*

Authors who write about the spiritual life would call such an experience "spiritual suffering", "spiritual desolation" or "spiritual dryness". It is a terrible thing to feel we have 'lost God', or to feel abandoned by him, to experience his absence from our lives. I'm sure all of us at times may have asked: "Where is God?"; "Why isn't he answering my prayers?"; "Why is he allowing these terrible things to happen to me or to my family or even to total strangers?". As spiritual pilgrims, it is important that we have some knowledge about the role of spiritual dryness in our lives. Its purpose is mainly to *purify* our relationship with God. (If you have my book, *Prayer: A Handbook for Today's Catholic* [now out of print], you will find in it two chapters on *Spiritual Dryness*.)

Despite Israel's experience of God's absence in their lives, they seem to possess an unshakable faith in him:

*You Lord are our father,
Our redeemer;
No ear has ever heard,
No eye has seen any God like you
And the mighty deeds you do*

The lament finishes with these beautiful but challenging words:

*Lord, you are our father;
We are the clay and you are the potter:
We are all the work of your hands.*

While the above words are very poetic, they are also very challenging because they call us to be moldable clay in God's hands. They call us to let God do with us what he wills. In a culture that calls us to be independent and self-sufficient, these words may not be so comforting.

During this Advent season, this reading calls us to face what is sinful in our lives, to place our trust in God's mercy and, if we are experiencing a sense of God's absence, trust that God is present even when we do not feel his presence.

Second Readings

During the Advent season, as during the rest of the liturgical year, we listen to readings from the epistles of the New Testament. Today's second reading is the opening verses from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

Little did Paul ever realize that his letters to the Corinthians and to other Christian communities would be collected together for generations of Christians to read. Reading letters like this one is like reading someone else's mail. We can assume that the Corinthians would have preferred if Paul's letters to them had not been saved since they portray them "warts and all". Fortunately for us, these letters have been preserved for they not only give us insight into Paul's mind and heart, and into the issues of a first-century small christian community, but they also continue to serve the faith journey of us who live 2,000 years later.

In today's verses, Paul, after greeting his readers, offers thanks to God for blessings bestowed through Jesus Christ. Paul has no doubt that the God, Isaiah and his people longed to see has come to them in Christ. Paul concludes his address by reminding the Corinthians of their call to develop a close *fellowship* with Christ.

Gospel, Cycle B, The Year of Mark

In our church and in most mainline Christian churches, there is a three-year cycle when it comes to the gospels. In *Cycle A* which we have just completed, we listen to *Matthew*; in *Cycle B* which we start today, we listen to *Mark*; and in *Cycle C*, we listen to the Good News of Jesus Christ as proclaimed and seen through the eyes of *Luke*. We listen to readings from John throughout parts of *all three* cycles, especially during the Easter season.

Mark was the first gospel to be written. Because Mark is also the shortest gospel, you will notice that on some Sundays, we will hear gospels from John and Luke. Today's passage has a strong note of urgency to it. "Be watchful! Be alert, for we do not know the hour when Christ will come."

Advent Wreath

If we live with others, or even if we live alone, we can observe the traditional practice of praying around the

Advent Wreath. You can use the following prayer to bless your wreath.

*Lord our God,
We praise you for your Son, Jesus Christ:
he is Emmanuel, the hope of the peoples,
he is the wisdom that teaches and guides us.
He is the Savior of every nation.
Lord God, let your blessing come upon us
as we light the candles of this wreath.
May the wreath and its light
be a sign of Christ's promise to bring us salvation.
May he come quickly and not delay.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen*

Also, when you light the Advent candle, you can say the following beautiful prayer, which is our opening prayer at today's Mass.

*Father in heaven,
Our hearts desire the warmth of your love and our
minds are searching for the light of your Word.
Increase our longing for Christ our Savior
and give us the strength to grow in love,
that the dawn of his coming may find us rejoicing
in his presence and welcoming the light of his truth.
We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen*

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.