

behavior, what is deceptive and underhanded in our personal lives but also what is hopeful in our efforts to defend life and justice.

Sharing the Word through the Liturgical Year / Gustavo Gutiérrez. – London : Geoffrey Chapman, 1997. – p.3

Related topics

For further study:

Advent; Eschatology; Kingdom of God; Discipleship; Repentance and reconciliation; Christ's coming – past, present, and future; Son of Man; Parousia

Closing Prayer

God of majesty and power,
amid the clamour of our violence
your Word of truth resounds;
upon a world made dark by sin
the Sun of Justice casts his dawning rays.

Keep your household watchful
and aware of the hour in which we live.
Hasten the advent of that day
when the sounds of war will be for ever stilled,
the darkness of evil scattered,
and all your children gathered into one.

We ask this through him whose coming is certain,
whose day draws near:
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever.

Collect for The First Sunday of Advent, Year A³

The First Sunday of Advent

(Sunday between 27 November and 3 December inclusive)

Principal Service readings

Isaiah 2.1-5	Isaiah's vision of peace, the end of war
Psalms 122	Pray for the peace of Jerusalem
Romans 13.11-14	'now is the time to awake out of sleep ...'
Matthew 24.36-44	Jesus talks about the second coming

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

Be on the alert

Jesus spoke to his disciples: ³⁶ 'About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'

Matthew 24.36-44 NRSV¹

³ *Opening Prayers : Scripture-related Collects for Years A, B and C, from The Sacramentary* / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999. – (The ICEL Collects, 1997)

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Comments and Questions

At the beginning of Advent the gospel reading is not about a beginning but an ending. This season of preparation for the coming of Christ is not just a preparation for Christmas, but also a preparation for Christ's second coming at the end of time. Advent is a time of expectation.

Thoughts about the final judgement lead to a strand of penitence in the season, seen, for example in the omission of the Gloria from the liturgy, and the challenge of whether we ourselves are ready for that coming.

St Paul's exhortation to the Christians at Rome is to live as if always in the daylight. Do we live like this? In what ways would we live differently if we knew that everything we did was being filmed, for example?

Human beings want to be able to see ahead, to predict the future; this can be seen in many activities from fortune telling to meteorology. Concerns about climate change and global warming add a note of urgency. Jesus has the humility to say that only the heavenly Father knows when the second coming will be (v.36). If he can live with that knowledge, can we?

Jesus seems to think that the end will come soon, though at an unexpected moment. With hindsight we know that the world has gone on for another two thousand years. Jesus, like Paul in today's reading from Romans, is mistaken. We understand that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine, but do we really believe it? If he is fully human why should he know when everything is going to happen? Or is it that God's will is not as fixed as we sometimes think it is, but rather open to change? Can he shorten or lengthen the days, as he wills?

The illustration Jesus uses of some people being whisked away suddenly, while others are left to suffer, is disconcerting. Events in the 'end times', called the *parousia* (= 'arrival') are mentioned by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 15.23 and 1 Thessalonians 4.16. How can we be prepared for such an unknown time?

Quotations

1

We know that there are three comings of the Lord. The third lies between the other two. It is invisible, while the other two are visible. In the first coming he was seen on earth, dwelling among men [and

women]; he himself testifies that they saw him and hated him. In the final coming "all flesh will see the salvation of our God," and "they will look on him whom they pierced." The intermediate coming is a hidden one; in it only the elect see the Lord within their own selves, and they are saved. In his first coming our Lord came in the flesh and in our weakness; in this middle coming he comes in spirit and in power; in the final coming he will be seen in glory and majesty. Because this coming lies between the other two, it is like a road on which we travel from the first coming to the last. In the first, Christ was our redemption; in the last, he will appear as our life; in this middle coming, he is our rest and consolation.²

St Bernard of Clairvaux, 1090–1153

2

Advent brings Christmas, judgement runs out into mercy. For the God who saves us and the God who judges us is one God. We are not, even, condemned by his severity and redeemed by his compassion; what judges us is what redeems us, the love of God. What is it that will break our hearts on judgement day? Is it not the vision, suddenly unrolled, of how he has loved the friends we have neglected, of how he has loved us, and we have not loved him in return; how, when we came (as now) before his altar, he gave us himself, and we gave him half-penitences, or resolutions too weak to commit our wills? But while love thus judges us by being what it is, the same love redeems us by effecting what it does. Love shares flesh and blood with us in this present world, that the eyes which look us through at last may find in us a better substance than our vanity.

The Crown of the Year : Weekly Paragraphs for the Holy Sacrament / Austin Farrer. London : Dacre Press, 1952. p.8

4

The Son of Man comes and surprises us at the least expected hour (Mt 24:44), especially in our daily encounter with human beings he has made his brothers and sisters. Thus the need to keep awake (v. 42) translates into listening to the clamor for liberation, supporting and empowering our peoples' deepest hopes. Waiting for the Lord does not bring us out of history; it involves us with it since we are hoping for the God who has come and is in our midst. Such a hope is ambitious but it is worthwhile. It will help us see what is inconsistent in our

² *Homelie pour l'Advent*, 5:1-3, Edition cistercienne, 4, 1966, pp.188-190. in *Liturgy of the Hours* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975), p.169.