

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT – A December 2, 2007

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and it marks the beginning of our period of spiritual preparation for the celebration of Christmas. For me personally, it's my favorite liturgical season, I think because it's so full of anticipation. In the midst of all the frantic activity going on in the secular world, Advent is meant to be a spiritually quiet and reflective time, like an oasis in the middle of a desert, a refuge where we can find protection from the bombardment of commercialism and worldly concerns.

Today's readings help to set us on this path by suggesting that Advent is a perfect time to hope for lasting peace among nations, to readjust our lives and to await the fullness of God's kingdom. But when we hear these readings carefully, we realize we have to do more than just *hope*. In fact, we are challenged to actually *make* these hopes into realities.

Advent is all about hope, that's why we hear the word *hope* so often during this season, especially in the Scripture readings throughout the Advent season. If we want to know a good definition of hope, I would say it is a desire and expectation that goals that might seem difficult to achieve may somehow be realized. St. Thomas Aquinas had a wonderful, concise definition of hope. He said hope is four things: agreeable, future, arduous and yet possible to attain.

Most of our hopes are probably rather selfish, when we stop to think about it. We hope for happiness for ourselves and our loved ones, ease in living, comfort in our finances, and other conveniences that serve us personally. And that's OK. But these readings today push us beyond our narrow self-interests and urge us to see the bigger picture: to hope for understanding and peace among nations, and to look forward to the full coming of God's kingdom for *all* people, not just those we like or have something in common with.

This idea about hoping *and* working for peace among nations shouldn't be just a passing thought. When we look back in history we see that this has always been a fervent hope. In the 8th century BC the great OT prophet Isaiah saw that the Assyrian armies had already defeated the northern kingdom of Israel and he was pretty sure they would soon defeat the southern kingdom of Judah, where Isaiah lived and preached his message of hope.

Isaiah's hope was that all nations might come to know the God of Israel and that the word of God would spread to all other nations, who would hear the word, live according to it, and so bring peace to all the world. This was his vision. Idealistic? Yes. Impossible? Not really.

Isaiah's hope did not depend on wise rulers or presidents or prime ministers, and certainly not on powerful weapons. His hope was that nations might transform their weapons of war into instruments of peace. But here we are, ten thousand years later, and lasting peace remains as elusive to us as it was in Isaiah's time. It's amazing that thousands of years of history don't seem to have taught us much.

Perhaps this is a sign that we are supposed to look inside ourselves more closely, and Advent is a great time for readjusting out personal lives. Even though it's not a season of penance, like Lent, Advent is still a time that we more consciously and directly turn our lives to God and his kingdom. As St. Paul says in our second reading, "Let us then throw off the works of darkness." So it is our own hope that Advent sheds a little light into our hearts so we can see where we might need some improvement.

You see, Advent not only is a preparation for Christmas, it's also a preparation for our entrance into God's eternal kingdom, whenever that may be. In this way, our entire life becomes an Advent. This is what both St. Paul and St. Matthew have in mind in the second reading and the Gospel. St. Paul reminds us that "our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed." And St. Matthew gives us

a few short parables telling us to be good and behave ourselves as we await the full coming of God's kingdom.

I like how the Gospel writers occasionally refer to some story in the OT to make their point. St. Matthew mentions Noah and the flood, and how people were living their lives without any concerns, until the flood came along unexpectedly and wiped them all out. Matthew is implying that they might have lived much better lives if they had known the end was so near. Our Christian tradition tells us the second coming of Jesus Christ might be just as sudden.

Then there is St. Matthew's mysterious reference to two men out in a field and two women grinding at a mill. In both cases, one is taken and one is left. What's this all about? The implication is that one is chosen for salvation and the other is not. Why would one be selected and not the other?

St. Matthew wants us to know that the final judgment will be very selective on God's part. Maybe choosy is a better word. Only God can make such discriminating judgments. The two men in the field are both doing the same thing, presumably tilling the soil, and therefore *seem* to be equal, but not necessarily in God's eyes. The same with the two women grinding at the mill. Things—and people—are not always as they appear, and only God can tell the difference.

The final parable poses the interesting question of knowing about something ahead of time and being vigilant. If we knew someone was going to break into our home, what would we do? Leave town? Install a security system? Hire a big burly guard? At the very least we would probably be vigilant in some way, and that also is a key word during Advent: vigilance. It means waiting with some kind of expectation.

On Thanksgiving day, just a week and a half ago, two of our priests died. One was elderly and had been seriously ill for several years. The other was very active, and in fact was having Thanksgiving dinner at a restaurant when he died. In such cases we always wonder: were they both prepared to die? Knowing both of them, they probably were. But we don't know for sure. And it makes us wonder: how well prepared are we at this moment?

So we are told that the Son of Man will come at an hour we do not expect, like a thief in the night, although that presents a rather negative image. Our readings today—and in fact the whole message of Advent—are about being vigilant, always watchful, and always on guard (but without any sense of paranoia, of course). We are challenged to continue to do good works and to imitate the life of Jesus that we read about in the Gospels.

And this is exactly what living a good Christian life is all about, whether it's Advent or any other time of year.