

Homily based on the readings from December 3, 2023 (Isaiah 63.16b-17, 19b, 64.2-7; 1 Corinthians 1.3-9; Mark 13.33-37)

Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come.

Today – as I am sure most of us realize – is the beginning of Advent, the season during which we prepare for the coming of Christ. (A quick aside: I asked the schoolchildren at Mass on Friday whose coming we are preparing for during Advent. Can anyone guess what answer I got? *Santa Claus*. Perhaps I should have been more watchful and alert in the questions I was asking.) In any event, we often think about Advent primarily in terms of Jesus' birth. Indeed, in less than a month, we will be celebrating Christmas, the Nativity of Our Lord. Advent is certainly a time for preparing our hearts and our homes to commemorate this most joyful event. Nevertheless, Advent has another meaning, which requires our immediate and undivided attention.

The word *advent* literally means “coming,” or “coming near.” It refers not only to Christ’s first coming in human form, but also to his ultimate return in heavenly glory. To quote Pope Saint Paul VI:

Advent has a twofold character, for it is a time of preparation for the Solemnities of Christmas, in which the First Coming of the Son of God to humanity is remembered, and likewise a time when, by remembrance of this, minds and hearts are led to look forward to Christ’s Second Coming at the end of time. For these two reasons, Advent is a period of devout and expectant *delight*.

Indeed, the first and second comings of Christ cannot be separated.

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, writing in the fourth century, made this connection explicitly:

At his first coming, [Jesus] was wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger. At his second coming he will be clothed in light as in a garment. In the first coming he endured the cross, despising the

shame; in the second coming he will be in glory, escorted by an army of angels.

The season of Advent brings both events equally into focus. Our anticipation of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem prepares us for his final coming in majesty.

Indeed, my own personal favorite Advent hymn is primarily focused on Christ's *second* coming:

Lo, he comes with clouds descending,
Once for favored sinners slain;
Thousand thousand saints attending,
Swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
Christ appears on earth to reign.

As Christians, how do we prepare for the coming of Christ? By putting up Christmas trees and hanging holiday lights? By purchasing presents

and roasting turkeys? These activities are not unimportant, but we must also take the opportunity to revitalize our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. As you may know, Advent is the beginning of the new liturgical year. We have just redecorated the church [and have new hymnals in our pews] and have begun a new set of readings at Mass. The new year brings an opportunity for a fresh start, a realignment of our lives and our priorities. It is up to each of us to determine how to take advantage of this situation.

Every one of us – regardless of how old we are and how long we have been coming to church – should take an unflinching look at our own spiritual lives. Are we fervent and sincere in our prayers, or do we perform them carelessly? Is the Holy Eucharist really the source and summit of our lives as Christians, or do we attend Mass merely out of habit or obligation? Is our connection with Jesus Christ truly the defining relationship of our lives? Honesty is crucial. If we attempt to rationalize our failures and defects, we are only harming ourselves.

Nevertheless, we must not lose heart. Despite the violet vestments, Advent is a time of joy rather than a season of sadness. Recall the words of Saint Paul VI: “Advent is a period of devout and expectant *delight*.” No matter what we do, Jesus is coming. Our job is simply to make ourselves ready to receive him.

One concrete suggestion, which we would all do well to follow, is to partake in the Sacrament of Reconciliation at least once during the Advent season. Even if that seems intimidating – even if we have not gone for many years – just remember that God already knows our sins and that he is *longing* to grant us his fatherly forgiveness. Like all the sacraments, Reconciliation is an outpouring of the unquenchable love that God has for each and every one of us. Not going to confession is like not opening a Christmas present that has our name on it.

Whatever we do, we must take the opportunity Advent provides to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ. We do not – indeed, we cannot – know the day or the hour of the Lord’s return. All we can do is remain

vigilant. *May he not come suddenly and find us sleeping. What he says to us, he says to all: "Watch!"*