

**This Sunday's Readings – the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent** – Today is not only the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, but is also the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of the new liturgical year. Last year (also known as Cycle C), the Gospel readings were from Luke. This year (also known as Cycle A), the Gospel readings are from Matthew. The season of Advent can be traced back to the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century. However, everyone celebrated it differently and for different lengths of time – some 4 weeks, some 6 weeks, and some less than 4 weeks. It was not until the Council of Trent in the 12<sup>th</sup> century that Advent was codified into the form we celebrate today. It was further enriched by Vatican II. Recall the theme of the scripture readings from the last few Sundays of the old liturgical year. It was a message of watchfulness, preparedness, and anticipation. Those same themes continue into this Sunday's readings.

The first reading is from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. This book, which is the longest book in the Bible, is divided into 3 parts and covers a period from 742 to 500 BC. First Isaiah, chapters 1-39, is attributed directly to Isaiah and was written prior to the Babylonian Captivity. Second Isaiah, chapters 40-55, is attributed to a disciple of Isaiah and was written toward the end of the Babylonian Captivity. Third Isaiah, chapters 56-66, is also attributed to a disciple and was written after the Babylonian Captivity. This reading from Chapter 2 is quite appropriate for the first Sunday of Advent. It describes the coming of the Lord at the end of time. That time is coming. All nations will flock to Jerusalem (Zion), which will be built on a high mountain. Please take a few moments to read today's responsorial Psalm 122 (A Pilgrim's Prayer for Jerusalem), which describes the beauty and importance of Jerusalem to the people. There will be peace and prosperity. The weapons of war will be turned into farm implements. The final verse is one of hope and anticipation – "let us walk in the light of the Lord". Fr. Roger Karban in his 1998 syndicated column adds this comment on Isaiah's vision – "Following in the steps of prior prophets, Isaiah first creates a vision of "days to come" days when Yahweh will glorify the Chosen People (Is 2:1-5). Gentile nations will "climb the Lord's mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob." Universal peace will break out. Everyone "shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again." This is going to be a terrific time to be alive. Yet the last line of the passage is the kicker, "O house of Jacob," the prophet proclaims, "come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" In other words, only if people are moving in the direction of the vision will the vision ever become a reality. Days to come can never be an excuse for forgetting days which are".

The Gospel reading from Matthew also speaks of the second coming (Parousia) at the end of time. Reginald H. Fuller, in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* explains this type of literary style – "This passage is from Matthew's version of the so-called synoptic apocalypse (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). Like other contemporary Jewish apocalypses, the synoptic apocalypse relates a series of catastrophes identifiable with historical events that preceded the Jewish revolt of A.D. 66-70. These events are to usher in the final consummation—the return of the Son of man, the last judgment, and the new heaven and the new earth". Matthew wrote his Gospel around 85 AD and was directed to the Judaeo-Christian community in Palestine. Remember that the early Christians at this time believed the second coming was immanent. However, many were coming to the realization that the Parousia would not

happen during their lifetime. Many were content to just sit back and wait. In other words, do nothing. That is what Jesus is speaking out against in recounting the story of Noah. Fr. Roger Karban in his 1998 syndicated column adds this comment on the Noah reference – “Also addressing a community waiting for the Parousia, Matthew illustrates his message with a classic example from the Hebrew Scriptures: the flood. "The coming of the Son of Man," he writes, "will repeat what happened in Noah's time. In the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and being married, right up to the day Noah entered the ark,...totally unconcerned until the flood came and destroyed them. So will it be at the coming of the Son of Man." Only those who prepared for the flood will be saved from the flood”. We cannot sit back and do nothing. We must continue on with our lives and continue to practice our faith and always be prepared. As Jesus said – “So too, you must also be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come”.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds these comments on today’s readings – “What American does not think about or prepare for the future? Americans save for a rainy day, to get married, to buy a home, to send the children to college, and to retire in comfort. Americans also protect themselves against future misfortunes with varieties of insurance. Jesus’ advice to his contemporaries, “Stay awake!” and be prepared for an imminent event, belabors the obvious for Americans (vv. 42-43). However, future events are not obvious for Middle Easterners.

#### PRESENT FOCUS

Generally speaking, people in the Middle East are unable and unwilling to think about the future. Only God knows that, and it is futile for humans to try to discover it. People of that world live entirely for the present. Jesus chides them for worrying about tomorrow and what they will eat, drink, or wear (Matt 6:25-34). He instructs them to ask God only for today’s bread and not a week’s supply (Matt 6:11). Where, then, did today’s exhortation to “stay awake” and “be watchful” for the “advent of the Son of Man” come from? Did Jesus say these words, or were they placed on his lips by his disciples?

#### PRESENT FRUSTRATION

Scholars point out that Jesus frequently proposed behaviors alternative to those favored in his culture. Obsessive and narrow focus on the present can cause a person to miss events just around the corner (which are also present but slightly delayed). By the time Matthew compiled his Gospel, around 80 to 85 C.E., Jesus had been dead and risen nearly fifty years. About ten to fifteen years prior to Matthew’s work, the failed revolt of the Judeans resulted in the utter demolition of their Temple by Titus and his Roman legions (70 C.E.). Still, the Son of Man had not yet returned, and many of Jesus’ original listeners had already died. Christians were frightened and becoming impatient. Matthew’s community was further agitated by its vocal Judean opponents. Their taunt to the Christians ran something like this: “Where is your ‘coming Son of Man?’ You keep saying ‘in *this* generation,’ but you are deceived. Remember Daniel’s inability to calculate and predict? You are similarly misguided. Give it up!”

#### HOPE FOR THE “FUTURE”

For today's reading, Matthew has borrowed and redirected parables from Mark 13 to console and instruct his beleaguered community. The Son of Man gave his word; he definitely will return (v. 35). No one can calculate the exact time because his coming will be unexpected, just as the flood was for Noah's contemporaries (vv. 37-39). For this reason, the Christian must be ever watchful. The parables about the two in the field (v. 40) and two grinding (v. 41) give no clue as to which will be taken and which will remain. Each person must be vigilant like the good homeowner, wary of thieves and vandals (v. 43). Each must be ever prepared for the Lord's sudden return. For our present-oriented ancestors in the faith, the ongoing delay of Jesus' expected imminent return forced them to think "future." When this delay had reached fifty years and more in Matthew's community, the evangelist was able to force his present-oriented people to begin to think of at least a slightly remote, if not yet very far off, future. The challenge to American believers is quite different. Americans are so terminally future oriented, often to a distant future (college for the infant; retirement for the new worker), that they frequently miss the present entirely. With our futures relatively well-secured, we need to be wakeful to and watchful of the present lest misfortune creep up on us before we realize it".

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