

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

First Sunday of Advent

Year C

28 November 2021



Collect

Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God,
the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ
with righteous deeds at his coming,
so that, gathered at his right hand,
they may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

Purple vestments, a wreath with candles, seasonal songs and no Gloria – these are the cues that signal the start of Advent and a new liturgical year today. The spirit of hope that gives Advent its appeal is swiftly established by the prophet Jeremiah, the psalmist and the apostle Paul.

Jeremiah encourages the troubled people of his day with God's promise of a new era of justice and peace. Immediately the psalm invites us to renew our trust in the goodness of God. Writing to the Thessalonians to calm their anxiety about Christ's return, Paul prays lovingly for them and appeals to them as a pastor.

If by now we feel comforted and confident, the gospel comes as a shock. The picture Jesus paints of the cosmic upheaval and sudden judgement of the end-time seems calculated to strike fear into our hearts. But he reassures us with the promise of liberation. Prayer will bring the strength and confidence we need to survive.

Jesus' constant intent is to free us from fear. His call is for us to be fully alive in the here and now. Today's readings conspire to invite us to stand tall, take heart, and get on with living "the life that God wants."

A reading from the prophet Jeremiah 33:14–16

See, the days are coming – it is the Lord who speaks – when I am going to fulfil the promise I made to the House of Israel and the House of Judah:

‘In those days and at that time,
I will make a virtuous Branch grow for David,
who shall practise honesty and integrity in the land.
In those days Judah shall be saved
and Israel shall dwell in confidence.
And this is the name the city will be called:
The Lord-our-integrity.’

First Reading

The book that bears Jeremiah’s name is a mix of material diverse in style, time and origin. It presents Jeremiah as a prophet called to ministry in the southern kingdom of Judah about the year 627 BC, a time of hope and reform under the leadership of King Josiah. But after Josiah’s death in 609, things went from bad to worse. The reform failed, Chaldean forces invaded Jerusalem, the city was sacked, the people exiled to Babylon, and finally Jeremiah himself became an exile in Egypt.

In these turbulent times, Jeremiah’s preaching was full of warnings, laments and threats of disaster, but there are splendid oracles of hope. Today’s short passage is one of these.

It’s a message of encouragement for God’s downcast people. Through the prophet God promises them a future ruler from the house of David who will reign with honesty and with God’s own integrity. Readers will note that the whole passage is spoken in God’s voice. This calls for a delivery that is both authoritative and reassuring. The reading is full of positive expressions: “fulfil,” “promise,” “virtuous,” “honesty,” “integrity” and “confidence,” each of which should be given due emphasis.

This very first reading of Advent strikes the note of spirited hope that will keep sounding throughout the season. Phrases in the oracle already alert us to the birth story of Jesus, son of David and Prince of Peace. Readers should enjoy launching the season with this prophetic promise.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 24:4–5, 8–9, 10, 14

R. To you, O Lord, I lift my soul.

Lord, make me know your ways.

Lord, teach me your paths.

Make me walk in your truth, and teach me:
for you are God my Saviour. **R.**

The Lord is good and upright.

He shows the path to those who stray,
he guides the humble in the right path;
he teaches his way to the poor. **R.**

His ways are faithfulness and love

for those who keep his covenant and will.

The Lord’s friendship is for those who revere him;
to them he reveals his covenant. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 24/25 is the prayer of an individual appealing to God for help in a time of trial. Its verses alternate between heartfelt pleas for divine assistance and expressions of confidence in God’s proven faithfulness. The three verses selected to serve as the responsorial psalm all fall into the latter category. They reinforce the message of hope proclaimed by Jeremiah.

Once readers have given the assembly time to take the prophet’s message to heart, they should announce the psalm response slowly and prayerfully. This will prompt the assembly to make it a prayer of peaceful trust instead of a short formula to be rattled off. Each repetition will then reinforce each one’s personal relationship with God.

Praying this particular psalm response rehearses an exchange that occurs later in the celebration. At the start of the eucharistic prayer, when the presider charges the assembly to “Lift up your hearts,” all reply, “We lift them up to the Lord.”

Readers will note the distinct character of the first verse in comparison with the other two. It is a plea addressed to God for guidance and help. The focus shifts in the following two verses which are in the form of public testimony to God’s goodness. All three verses are imbued with devout faith and trust and should be prayed as such.

A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians

3:12 – 4:2

May the Lord be generous in increasing your love and make you love one another and the whole human race as much as we love you. And may he so confirm your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless in the sight of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus Christ comes with all his saints.

Finally, brothers, we urge you and appeal to you in the Lord Jesus to make more and more progress in the kind of life that you are meant to live: the life that God wants, as you learnt from us, and as you are already living it. You have not forgotten the instructions we gave you on the authority of the Lord Jesus.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke

21:25–28, 34–36

Jesus said to his disciples: 'There will be signs in the sun and moon and stars; on earth nations in agony, bewildered by the clamour of the ocean and its waves; men dying of fear as they await what menaces the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand erect, hold your heads high, because your liberation is near at hand.'

'Watch yourselves, or your hearts will be coarsened with debauchery and drunkenness and the cares of life, and that day will be sprung on you suddenly, like a trap. For it will come down on every living man on the face of the earth. Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen, and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.'

Second Reading

Tracing the chronology of Paul's life and the path of his journeys has vexed generations of biblical scholars. However most believe his first letter to the Thessalonians was written from Corinth around the year 51. Paul lodged there after having announced the good news in Philippi and Thessalonica on his first mission beyond Asia Minor. Thus 1 Thessalonians is arguably the first surviving document of the New Testament.

Unlike many of Paul's letters, it isn't prompted by a crisis of faith or morals in the community. Its tone is that of a fond mentor encouraging his charges. The main issue to be addressed is the community's concern about members who had died before Christ returned in glory to complete his saving mission. Paul calls on them to remain calm and devote themselves to growing in faith and love.

His deep desire for their progress prompts the prayer which forms the first half of the reading. It is filled with love for the fledgling community and with profound faith in God's saving love for humankind. The rest of the reading is an exhortation for the Thessalonians to grow in holiness, issued with Paul's apostolic authority. On its own it might sound demanding, but the preceding prayer makes it a heartfelt appeal.

The reading as a whole is short, but most of the sentences are long. Readers will need to rehearse it carefully so that the assembly will not lose track as the primary affirmations are developed. They have the happy task of proclaiming the message in the spirit of Paul's infectious enthusiasm.

Gospel

The gospel for the first Sunday of Advent echoes that heard two Sundays ago. The Church's year of worship heads to a close with extracts from Jesus' discourse on the end times, and the new one begins on the same note. The key difference is the evangelist – Mark then, Luke now.

Luke distinguishes between the trauma of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the cosmic upheaval of the final days. His overall interest is in how Jesus' disciples should live in the indefinite interval between these two events.

The reading falls into two clear halves. The first is concerned with the parousia when the Son of Man will reappear in heavenly glory to bring the fearful convulsions of the universe to an end. The second moderates this perspective with a focus on how believers should behave in the interim.

The ominous tone of each part is offset by final words of encouragement. The first concludes with the promise of liberation. Faithful disciples can await the end with heads held high. The second, while urging them to stay awake and pray for the strength to survive, offers the prospect of standing up "with confidence before the Son of Man."

The vivid imagery invites dramatic (though not melodramatic) declamation but the strongest emphasis should be on the positive declarations. They lead us into an Advent of peace, prayer, hope and gladness.

Concluding Prayers

Solemn Blessing for Advent

May the almighty and merciful God,
by whose grace we have placed our faith
in the First Coming of his Only Begotten Son
and yearn for his coming again
sanctify us by the radiance of Christ's Advent
and enrich us with his blessing.

Amen.

As we run the race of this present life,
may he make us firm in faith,
joyful in hope and active in charity.

Amen.

So that, rejoicing now with devotion
at the Redeemer's coming in the flesh,
we may be endowed with the rich reward of eternal life
when he comes again in majesty.

Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, + and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.

Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for Advent, *The Roman Missal* p. 709)