



WEEK ONE

NEW LIFE IN
CHRIST

DAY 1

THE NEED TO PAY ATTENTION

GOSPEL READING FROM SUNDAY WEEK 1 OF ADVENT

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. [Luke 21:25-28]

SOMETHING TO CONSIDER

This is not one of those comforting texts and seems to be a strange place to start our journey together. The words are disconcerting, mainly because they hint at a future that seems remarkably like our present. As temperatures rise, storms increase in ferocity, pollution is rampant, and a pandemic renders some unable to breathe, we can wonder whether Luke knew a thing or two.

Maybe he did, although we can be comforted by the thought that there has scarcely been a time in the last two thousand years when Christians have not applied this text to their experience. The specifics may change, but the sense of our not being in control regularly impacts.

What is important here is what Luke says next. It is the call to pay attention that needs our response. For the Christian, a vigilant heart is never an optional extra. We are called to pay attention, always – to what God is doing, what we are doing, and what is going on around us.

Interestingly, this text harkens right back to the spiritual beginnings of the Judeo-Christian faith. Think of the opening lines of the bible. There we see the Spirit of God ‘hovering over the waters’ and bringing order to the chaos (Genesis 1:2). It is almost as if Luke describes the undoing of that initial act of taming the chaos in today’s reading as a precursor to creating something new.

We need not be stressed about this, as long as we are attentive and take what God asks us seriously (Philippians 2:12). God desires that ‘none be lost’ (2 Peter 3:9), and God will provide us with every assistance to ensure that the experience Luke describes need not overwhelm us but be the source of joy (Luke 21:28).

The road we are on is not always easy (Matthew 7:14), which brings us back to the fact that we must pay attention. God’s invitation carries with it ‘risks, challenges and opportunities’ [Rejoice and Be Glad n 2] as gradually we learn that God requires everything we are, say and do – the entirety of our hearts and lives – but only so that he can pour everything that he is, says and does into us (Romans 5:5) [Rejoice and Be Glad n 1]. We are people of joy and hope, for our trust is not in ourselves but in the one who is always faithful (2 Timothy 2:13).

You are not excluded from God’s promises unless you choose to be. The shaking of ‘the powers of heaven’ need not burden you. The invitation that God has made to enter into the life he has for us is also made to you [Rejoice and Be Glad n 3].

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

How do you respond to the thought that God is calling you to take him as seriously as he takes you? Is God someone you are happy to believe is there, as long as he leaves you to get on with whatever it is you want to do? What might be the problem with this approach to God?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Loving God, we place our trust in you and we offer you our hearts and our lives. Help us to see your loving presence in all areas of our lives.

Amen.

Sample

DAY 2

HEALED AND SHAPED BY GOD

GOSPEL READING FROM MONDAY FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“When Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.” And he said to him, “I will come and cure him.” [Matthew 8:5-7]

SOMETHING TO CONSIDER

Too easily in the life of faith, we can resist going on the journey to ‘new life in Christ’. We do this for myriad reasons, each as individual as we ourselves are.

With all the best intentions in the world, we are instinctively ‘both and’ people; we both want what God is offering, and we want to get to decide how much and to what degree the road that God has for us impacts our lives. We effectively paralyse ourselves as we alternately respond to God and then resist. Each of us is the centurion’s servant, to one degree or another.

Spiritual paralysis has its consequences, for it prevents us from fully becoming the person God is creating us to be. Of relevance is this earlier text from the prophet Isaiah where he invites us to climb God’s mountain in search of God, guided by his light (Isaiah 2:1-5). The prophet speaks to us of the call to live the life of faith fully.

We are to take the trek beyond our state of frequent self-involvement and debilitating futility and instead turn our attention to the only thing that matters – going in search of the One who calls us into life in him.

This journey is unique to each of us and involves not only discovering our life in God but becoming the person God intends for us to be [Rejoice and Be Glad n 11]. It is designed to be a joyful journey full of companionship, laughter and promise, and yet it worries us that we are being called along a path that we do not fully understand. It brings with it the promise of eternity and of horizons of which we are scarcely aware.

So why do we resist this trek up Isaiah's mountain towards the reality that is our life in God? What can we do about our paralysis? The healing stories we encounter in the Gospels point us towards the One who alone can provide healing and the promise of deep joy and freedom to come. Ultimately, while the grace of spiritual healing comes from God, the desire to be healed comes from us. Today, our prayer can be for healing from the paralysis that prevents us from walking along the paths that God has in store for us.

We are incapable of fixing this situation ourselves, and we must acknowledge that. Instead, we must get used to turning again and again to the One in whom our hope resides. There is no other recipe for this. The life of faith does not conform to our strategies and desire to take charge. We await God's intervention and call on him with all the faith we can muster. As St Irenaeus teaches us:

“It is not you who shapes God; it is God who shapes you. If, then, you are the work of God, await the hand of the artist who does all things in due season. Offer him your heart, soft and tractable, to keep the form in which the artist has shaped you.

Let your clay be moist lest you grow hard and lose the imprint of God's fingers." [Against the Heresies 4.39.2]

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

We both want what God is offering us, and we resist it?
Why? What can we do about it?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Loving God,
You call us to live a life of faith fully.
We pray for your healing and strength to walk wherever you
lead and to become who you created us to be.

Amen.

Sample

DAY 3

LEARNING TO RESPOND

GOSPEL READING FROM TUESDAY FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”
[Matthew 4:18-19]

SOMETHING TO CONSIDER

Yesterday was the day for acknowledging our paralysis. Today our ability to see, hear and respond comes to the fore. While these first disciples have no idea where the call they receive will lead them, they recognise the invitation and say ‘yes’.

When it comes to our encounter with God, we all stand in need of having our ability to respond healed. The moment we start to take our relationship with God seriously and begin to reflect on how we are called to live in response to that relationship, our blindness becomes apparent. Do we even see what God is doing, much less how we are to respond to it? Perhaps we would rather not see?

Central to this is our willingness to ‘encounter reality’ [Rejoice and Be Glad n 47]. By this, we mean each of us needs to learn to look at ourselves and the world we live in with wisdom and peace. Without upset or judgement, we are called to encounter things as they are, on their own terms.

This can take a certain amount of spiritual bravery, which may be why we resist. We form our pictures of the way we think things are, and even though we do not always like the picture we have created, we take comfort from the thought that it makes sense to us. It is our vision of ourselves and our world. We need God to show us what we are to do [see Rejoice and Be Glad n 96].

Too easily, we can become caught in an unreality – seeking to impose our ideals on ourselves and others – and increasingly stressed about the fact that, with the best efforts in the world, it inevitably does not go very well. To deal with this, we can seek to hide away with those we consider to be like-minded, with the ‘world outside’ related to as the enemy. Our faith is intended to be our way of engaging with the world that God so loves (John 3:16), and yet we can at times act as if our faith calls us to be part of a cult – turned in on itself for our protection and to keep us from being disturbed. Cults thrive on drawing people in, but from there, seek to control their behaviour and keep them in line by making them feel special and distrustful of the outside world. This is the death of faith and the path to spiritual inauthenticity.

That is not what Jesus did, and it is not what we are called to do. We may be tempted to stay in ‘the upper room’ (Acts 2), but an encounter with the Holy Spirit, in the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, will always drive us out of our place of security to engage with the world, if it is authentic.

Here we discover why those stories about the healing of the blind, the deaf and the lame are relevant to us. We are the “man born blind”, fundamentally unable to see who God is and what God is doing without the intervention of God’s grace.

We are the ones with hearing and speech impediments: we cannot hear God's words, and we do not know how to proclaim God's truth. We are the lame: we can run away on our own paths, but are we able to take one step along the path to which God is calling us?

If Jesus Christ is to be born in us, we must begin by acknowledging a problem: we cannot see, we cannot hear, we cannot speak, and we do not know how to walk the paths of God.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

It is right that we have our ideals, for they give us a sense of purpose and direction, and challenge us to live an authentic life of faith...but in what circumstances might they get in the way?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Placing our trust in you, merciful God,
We pray for the eyes to see you more clearly
and for the strength to follow the path in which you lead us.

Amen

DAY 4

THE MUSIC OF THE GOSPEL

FIRST READING FROM WEDNESDAY FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

[Isaiah 25:6–8]

SOMETHING TO CONSIDER

The greatest obstacle for people of faith is, as the great St. Thomas Aquinas noted, the question ‘why do good people suffer?’ This question becomes the foundation for the accusation against the existence of a loving God that many an atheist has triumphantly employed. The accusation is premised on an assumption: that because God’s is the hand behind all creation, then God is the reason why suffering exists. It is akin to blaming the light for the darkness. The darkness in our homes and hearts exists because we fail to turn on the light. It is not the light’s fault that we do this.

The truth is, we have no real idea why God allows suffering. We have speculated answers over the years: is it there to

teach us, punish us, or make us less reliant on ourselves and more reliant on God? The fact is, none of these responses ultimately satisfies. If it were simple, we would have understood it and solved it ages ago. Instead, it is part of everyone's experience – despite our attempts to avoid it all costs.

There are only three things we know for certain about suffering firstly, that it will not last forever for those who accept God's mercy (see today's reading), secondly, that God wishes to work with and in us to address suffering in the world (see Matthew 25). Thirdly, that God took his place in this world of suffering by becoming one of us in an overwhelming act of mercy and solidarity (see Christmas Day!).

The first and third points are good to know and are worthy of prayerful reflection. However, it is the second point that interests us here. As we think about our role in alleviating suffering, we are to be people who learn from our past [All Brothers and Sisters n 13], for those who do not learn from the past are 'doomed to repeat it'. Experience tells us that the greatest sufferings a human being often has to endure are those sufferings inflicted by others. Sadly, sometimes we are those 'others', inflicting harm and violence on people we do not even know through our lack of care and attention [All Brothers and Sisters n 36 & 39].

We must learn what it means to live in response to the 'music of the Gospel' [All Brothers and Sisters n 277] if we are to inherit the promises described by Isaiah in today's text.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Pope Francis' phrase 'the music of the Gospel' is a curious one. What might it mean? And how does it apply to our lives of faith?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Merciful God,

Help our hearts be like your heart, full of love and compassion.

Help us to share our hearts with those in need.

Amen

Sample

DAY 5

BEING RE-CREATED IN GOD'S IMAGE

GOSPEL READING FROM THURSDAY FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!” [Matthew 7:26-27]

SOMETHING TO CONSIDER

There are times when all you can do is hang on. No matter what imagery we use to describe it – wrestling with the angel, jumping onto the ark, running towards the mountain, or grounding ourselves on the rock to wait out the storm (see today's reading for this last image), the faith message that comes down from our spiritual ancestors is consistent and insistent: do not give up.

The image of wrestling with the angel comes to us from the book of Genesis (32:22-32). There we read of Jacob and the fight he had all night with the one variously described as God or as the angel of God. It matters not which. We learn from it that there are moments in the faith-lives of every individual where the battle to make sense of God and what God is doing almost brings us to ruin. It has to be so, as God leads us beyond our naïve and immature faith into something that can endure for eternity. A blessing ensues (32:26-29).

The ark is, of course, a reference to Noah and that curious story where God provided a place of refuge for those battered by a flood [see Genesis 6 – 9]. Again, it is primarily telling us something about our experience. When the waters rise, and the winds howl, get into the ark of the only one who can keep you safe. Take refuge in him. Everything you need to survive will be provided so that you can rebuild.

The one running towards the mountain, in our third image, is Elijah (1 Kings 19-20). Is he running towards something or running away from it? It is a bit of both. Having (quite deservedly it would seem) earned the wrath of Jezebel, he takes refuge by seeking the only one who alone can save us. On that mountain, he learns that God is not present in the violence that he, Elijah, had inflicted (see 1Kings 18). Instead, God is to be found in a new way Elijah has to learn and had not foreseen (1 Kings 19:10-18). By taking refuge on the mountain of God, Elijah learns something about who God is and about who we are called to be in response to God. God is present in gentle mercy – not in violent retribution. It is the beginnings of the gradual realisation that God is not to be understood as being in the image of his warlike and headstrong people. Instead, culminating in what we learn in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, we are to become as loving and merciful as God is. We are to be in his image, not he in ours. This is the new life in Christ into which we are being formed.

These are just a few of the stories and events that culminate in Jesus' teaching in today's gospel reading. Keep returning to God as the only one on who you can depend. Do it as a matter of urgency every day. Wrestle with him. Make your home in the ark of his embrace. Run towards him as fast as you can. Recognise him as the rock upon which you are invited to build your life.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

In a recent document from the Congregation for Clergy on parish renewal, parishes are encouraged to be places that welcome and support people as they undertake their journey in faith [PCPC n 25]. In this each of us should expect to be companioned by those who understand the life of faith and how to support those who are seeking to live it [PCPC n 26]. How does this apply to you?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Faithful God,
You call us to new life in you.
With a love that is responsive and merciful,
help us to be people of compassion and to share you with
those we meet.

Amen

DAY 6

ENOUGH HAS BEEN GIVEN

GOSPEL READING FROM FRIDAY FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

“Two blind men followed Jesus, crying loudly, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” They said to him, “Yes, Lord.” [Matthew 9:27-28]

SOMETHING TO CONSIDER

This is more than just an account of two lucky blind men. While that would be worth celebrating in its own right, it has little to do with you and me on the surface of it. The call for mercy is addressed here to the “Son of David”. In reminding us of Jesus’ ancestral link with King David, Matthew brings to mind ‘salvation history’.

It becomes relevant to us in the realisation that God has been at work with men and women down through the ages from earliest times and continues to be so. The People of Israel, King David, John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul etc. are all linked by the fact that they participate in and contribute to bringing about God’s plan of salvation. This plan is God’s plan for you.

Jesus is the pivotal point in this plan. Prepared for by the prophets of the Old Testament, proclaimed by the Apostles and their successors in the New Testament and beyond, Jesus is the cornerstone around which the whole plan of salvation is arranged (see Ephesians 2:20).

To participate in God's ongoing plan of salvation, you need only one thing: to be willing to embrace God's healing mercy and then share that mercy with others. In this, understand that just because your life might seem 'ordinary' to you, there is no reason to assume that God is not able to work in and through you [Rejoice and Be Glad n 8].

In an earlier reflection (see Day 4), we noted that central to our growing into this new life in Christ, we come to understand that ours is the task of alleviating suffering in the world, to the degree that each of us is able. We are reminded of this by Pope Francis, as he calls us to genuinely encounter and respond to those that society might regard as 'useless and expendable'. He calls us to find ways of including those on the peripheries of life, "for they have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centres of power where weighty decisions are made" [All Brothers and Sisters n 215]. They have much to teach us, even as we serve them.

We have time, but each of us needs to get on with it. We cannot simply leave it to others. Our time is not unlimited, denoted by the phrase "the end times". By that phrase, we do not mean that the world as we know it is about to end right now - only the Father knows when that will occur (Mark 13:32). What we mean is that, as a result of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the subsequent giving of the Holy Spirit, humanity entered the age where all had been put in place to bring about the kingdom of God. Jesus is the culmination and the endpoint of God's plan for the salvation and restoration of the world. There is nothing more to be added. Enough has been given, and now God's plan is simply playing itself out. Perhaps the only question is whether or not we are contributing to the coming of God's kingdom through our faith and acts of mercy and service, or whether we are failing to let it come about in and through us. The choice is for each one of us.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

To live the baptismal vocation, and the mission that goes with it, very little is needed. But that which is needed happens to be essential. What is that? And what holds us back?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Loving God,
Through your love, empower us to be your disciples in faith.
Guide us to walk as Jesus walked, and love as Jesus loved.
Help us respond to your call to reach out in service.

Amen

DAY 7

THIS IS THE WAY

GOSPEL READING FROM SATURDAY FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

[Jesus said to his disciples] “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.”
[Matthew 10:7-8]

SOMETHING TO CONSIDER

We are people with a mission, always called to “proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ holy in our hearts, and have our answer ready for anyone who asks the reason for the hope that we have” (1 Peter 3:15). It begins with locating Jesus ‘in our hearts’, deeply aware that he resides in us and we in him. This awareness changes everything – the way we speak, how we act, and the things with which we concern ourselves.

This raises questions for people, in response to which we can speak of “the reason for the hope that we have”. This is the essence of evangelisation from the Catholic perspective. We are to allow the new life of Christ to live in us, which in turn causes people to wonder.

When it comes to speaking about our faith, we need to try to see these things from the perspective of those we encounter. We must put ourselves in the shoes of those who come our way and resist the temptation to think the best way to speak to people who do not understand us is by speaking LOUDER.

God shows us the way, in and through the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is inviting his disciples to share his mission, which is an interweaving of proclamation and action.

The reading gives an insight into how focused God is in his attempts to reach out to and gather his people. In one sense, this is all that is on God's mind. God is constantly reaching out to us, inviting us into his life, which is always at his initiative [Rejoice and Be Glad n 52]. Our healing and our justification are always by the free gift of God. Our faith and our works are our spiritual and incarnated response to that gift [Rejoice and Be Glad n 53 - 54].

There are times when we can find ourselves wondering what God is doing and why. Perhaps we can contemplate the thought that he is calling each of us and, through us, calling others to be with him for eternity. For that is why he made us. Everything else we are involved in, and everything else we imagine God to be doing, is secondary to that primary invitation and is of use only to the degree that it assists us in responding to God and in reaching out to others.

What would our world and our Church be like if we took that seriously?

We do not have to do this alone. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us: "though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more...when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'" [Isaiah 30:20-21]

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Which might cause us to reflect – to what degree does the way I live my faith cause people to wonder what I happen to believe in? If no one can tell what we believe by how we live, what might that say? What we are to do and how we are to live is not hard to know, but can be hard to do. Why?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Lord Jesus,
You are the way, the truth and the life, and the reason for hope. Transform our hearts that we may respond to your love and reach out to others.

Amen

Sample