

Homily notes for Sunday, Dec 1, 2019, First of Advent A

Is 2:1-5; Rom 13:11-14; Mt 24:37-44

- 1. Today, as we enter the Advent season,** we begin our yearly pilgrimage through the events of our history of salvation starting with the preparation for the birthday celebration of Jesus.
- 2. Advent means coming.** We are invited to meditate upon **three comings of Jesus:** his first coming in history as a baby in Bethlehem, then his coming into our lives personally, for our salvation, and finally his *Second Coming* at the end of the world to reward the just and to punish the wicked.
- 3. We see the traditional signs of Advent** in our Church: violet vestments and hangings and the Advent wreath. These remind us that we have to prepare for the rebirth of Jesus in our hearts and lives, enabling him to radiate his love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness around us.
- 4. The readings in the early Sundays of Advent always carry forward the "end of the world" theme** from the last Sunday, when we celebrated the feast of Christ the King. Does this "End of the World" talk make much sense? In our daily living, and even in our study of modern history, nothing like this appears. But, if we take into account that supernatural, spiritual world, that is revealed in the near-death and out of body experiences and in our encounters with demonic evil, then, perhaps we can gain a deeper sense of aspects of the world that we cannot see but which may come crashing in upon us. This is also why we pray the Rosary. We are giving praise and honor to the Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and asking her to intercede for us before her Son and even before God, the Father. Perhaps we need to take this concern for "being ready" with greater seriousness.

Focus on the Readings:

5. Isaiah (2:1-5): In the context of the condemning prophecy of the sins, evils, and injustices of the people of Judah, Isaiah gives a Messianic prophecy of the blessings of God for those of his people who have returned to him in holiness. The prophet looks forward to the time when the Covenant between God and His people will be extended to all people, and the Temple in Jerusalem will be the worshipping place for all mankind, so that all may live in peace and harmony with God. In the vision of Isaiah, however, Judah, and Jerusalem, her capital, is shown as the place to which all nations will come for "*instructions in righteous living.*"

"Come, let us climb the Lord's mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob,
That he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths.
From Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (v.3)

Note the emphasis on teaching and instruction. Most teaching comes through words. How important is it to know the Word of the one who created us? Hence it is worth the effort to "climb to the Lord's mountain..." Do we really believe that the "teachings of God" are infinitely valuable and lead to great happiness and success? Are not the readings in the Mass, the preaching, and continual meditation upon them of critical importance? How great is the wisdom of the Church in proposing the Liturgical Year and all the readings that correspond to it! Could we do this on our own? Is this not a reason why we need to build up the Church and its ministry? The call here is not to go deeper into our hearts but to go up to the House of the Lord where he will instruct us? This is why we are about a campaign of stewardship, both for the ordering of our personal lives more to the Lord but also to build up the "House of the Lord" so we can, together, better do his work.

6. Then, hence, God will judge (justly) between the nations in such a way that they will no longer fight but be in peace. Note that these promises are not personal! They are for the entire society or nation. It says that the Lord will mediate all disputes among nations, and "*they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.*" There will be peace, prosperity and joy wherever the words of the Lord are obeyed.

In contrast think of the cities in Syria and Iraq or of corrupt locations in the West where the words of the true God are ignored (*Note the rise of Christianity in Iran*).

7. The Responsorial Psalm (Ps 122) is a joyous hymn originally meant to be sung as pilgrims journeyed to Jerusalem, the site of the Temple, the dwelling place of God on earth. As we sing the Psalm today, it invites us to look longingly toward Christmas, the feast that celebrates the Incarnation of God among us.

8. The second reading: In the NAB this section is titled “Awareness of the End of Time.” St Paul is exhorting his people to be ready for the return of the Lord. St Paul gives particular directions for how to be ready for the Lord. It sounds like he is addressing contemporary Americans, especially our youth. He tells them and us to “*Conduct yourselves properly,*” not to engage in the “*orgies, drunkenness, promiscuity and lust*” of their pagan days. How many in today’s America are “functional pagans?” He condemns their “*rivalry and jealousy*” and advises them to get ready to meet Jesus at his *Second Coming*. Paul believes that Jesus' *Second Coming* will be a day of salvation only for those who are already acting in a proper manner. We, too, must act as pilgrims, entering wholeheartedly into our yearly pilgrimage through salvation history, leaving behind whatever might hinder our progress, and accepting whatever hardships our journey might entail.

9. Gospel: Matthew 24 is known as the “little apocalypse”. It is found in all three synoptic gospels (See Mark 13 and Luke 21). In it the destruction of Jerusalem is foretold, and the disciples are warned of the coming persecution and of the need to be alert and to watch spiritually. We, likewise, must be prepared.

10. That is why we are involved in this stewardship program. We want to be closer to Jesus, not just in thought but with all our lives. That’s why we want all aspects of our lives, our time, talents and treasure, to be under Jesus’s control. That is why during our Stewardship Renewal, we at St. Boniface are affirming that all three elements of stewardship - time, talent, treasure - are equally important. We are called to make God the first priority in our lives - not only with time, talent, and treasure, but with our whole hearts.

11. With this awareness, we are inviting you to prepare yourselves for our Renewal Sunday, next week. You have the ministry catalogues. You have the commitment cards. I ask you to prayerfully and carefully fill these out. Don’t get carried away and don’t get discouraged if you feel that your involvement at the Church can’t be as much as you would like. Be prudent and practical.

12. As an example I think of a mother of a rather poor family who didn’t even have a car with six children. She could, at best, get to Church some Sundays. But she was a saint. Here home was faithful, disciplined and godly. Every one of her seven children have been faithful Catholics their entire lives! She lived that personal discipleship in the situation she was in. At the same time, we need to strengthen the Church. The Church had been there for her and was there for her family when they needed it. We need it to be around and to be vigorous.

13. We need to be alert even while we work or when we are preoccupied with things: The man working in the field and the woman working at the mill will be “left”, because they won’t leave their work. True enough – work is important. We need to provide food and shelter for ourselves and our families. But there is something more important than our work, our sports, our diversions, that is, the coming of the Son of Man and our faith in him. How preoccupied can we be to care for our possessions? We lock our doors and windows. We leave a light on when we're gone. We put in an alarm system. We insure our possessions. We do these things now because a thief could come at some unknown time. **How about caring for our souls?** We never know when the Lord is coming for us.

Additional interesting background notes:

This second reading from Romans is the famous passage that St. Augustine read which gave him the power to convert to Christianity. His dominant sin was that of sexual relations. He had had a concubine for nearly 17 years and a son by her. Note in the Confessions, the concubine is never named. Hence, we can see the importance of sexual purity and holiness in the eyes of God (See 1 Thess 4:3-8).

Two men took a deep-sea fishing trip one summer, but because it was hurricane season, the wind and waves capsized their boat. Fortunately, they were able to swim to a small island. Unfortunately, it was in the middle of nowhere. "The first man says, "We're doomed! We're a hundred miles from shore! No one will ever find us!" The second man says, "I'm not worried. I make \$6 million a year." The first man says, "Are you kidding me? We have no food or water, and I don't see any ATMs! Your money is useless!" "I disagree," said the second man, "I make \$6 million a year and I *tithe*. I assure you my pastor will find me."

While it's a funny joke, would it be as funny if the guy said, "My pastor will find me, I'm the president of the Parish Council"? Or, "My pastor will find me, I lead the Bible Study." No, it wouldn't be as funny, because somewhere, in the back of our minds, we think money is more valuable to the Church than service. But during our Stewardship Renewal, we at St. Boniface are affirming that all three elements of stewardship - time, talent, treasure - are equally important. We are called to make God the first priority in our lives - not only with time, talent, and treasure, but with our whole hearts.

People have been repeatedly wrong in predicting the Second Coming. The Jehovah's Witnesses frightened gullible followers at least 3 times during the last century with their "end of the world" predictions - in 1914, 1918 and 1974. It was in 1978 that the media flashed the shocking news of the mass suicide of 914 men and women from the U.S.A. They belonged to a doomsday cult called the Peoples Temple, in Jonestown, Guyana and they committed suicide at the command of their paranoid leader, Rev. Warren (Jim) Jones. In 1988 Edgar Whisenant, a NASA engineer, used his mathematical skills to set a date for the return of Jesus. He wrote a book called, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Take Place in 1988*. In the same year Rev. Colin Deal published a book titled *Christ Returns By 1988 - 101 Reasons Why*. A very popular book in 1989 was *89 Reasons Why the World will End in 1989*. It was in 1995 that the landmark apocalyptic thriller novel, *Left Behind*, first of a series of 16 books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins (*Left Behind, Tribulation Force, Nicolae, Soul Harvest, Apollyon, Assassins, The Indwelling, The Mark, Desecration, The Remnant, Armageddon, and Glorious Appearing + 4 new ones*) began hitting Christian bookstores. Since then, over 62 million copies of the *Left Behind* series and its related books have been sold, generating \$650 million. In October, 2005 a big-budget film, *Left Behind*, based on this novel series, was released and shown in many Evangelical Christian parishes. The film *Omega Code*, released in October 1999, was an independent movie funded by the Trinity Broadcasting Network, the largest Evangelical Christian TV network in the U.S. It was promoted by a team of 2,400 U.S. Evangelical pastors. The plot involves a portrayal of the *rapture*, when "born again" and "saved" Christians, both alive and dead, are supposed to fly up in the air to meet Jesus on his *Second Coming*. *Omega Code* was rated in the top 10 grossing movies for October 1999. This is how modern man reacts to the end of the world. But for us, as more sober and accurate Catholics today's readings remind us that we should be well prepared and always ready to meet Jesus at all times, either at the end of our lives or at the end of the world, whichever comes first, without getting panicky.

In the Eucharistic Acclamation we profess our faith in Jesus' Second Coming: "We proclaim Your Death, O Lord, and profess Your Resurrection until You come again"; and **in the Creed** we proclaim our belief that "*He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no*

end." One Bible scholar has estimated that there are 1,845 references to Christ's second coming in the Old Testament and 318 references in the New Testament. We see the traditional signs of Advent in our Church: violet vestments and hangings, dried flowers on the altar, and the Advent wreath. We light a candle on this wreath each Sunday until all four are lit. These signs remind us that we are waiting for the rebirth of Jesus in our hearts and lives in love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness.

The "Rapture." The reading from Romans contains a disputed reference to the so-called "*rapture*," an event in which, it is supposed, some people will be taken up from life on earth directly into the air to meet the returning Christ. This concept of "*dispensationalism*," proposed by Rev. Nelson Darby an Irish Anglican lawyer -pastor in A.D. 1800, is a misinterpretation, however. The belief in the *Rapture* is rooted in the fourth and fifth chapters of 1 Thessalonians. In this scheme, the *Rapture* was called the "*day of the Lord*" which would come like "*a thief in the night*" (1 Thess. 5:2). After this secret removal of believers would come the rise of the Antichrist and the placement of the "Mark of the Beast" on his followers during seven years of *Tribulation*. At the end of those seven years, the second coming of Christ and *Armageddon*, the final battle between good and evil, would take place. The passage in Matthew (24:40-41), does, indeed, talk about some people being "*taken*" and some being "left behind," but the word for "taken" (*paralambanomai*) means, not "to go up" but rather "to go along with." It isn't a magical word about the "*born again and saved*" people floating up in the air as many of our Protestant brothers believe. It is much more like Jesus' words to the apostles by the Sea of Galilee: "*follow me*" or "come along with me." This is the traditional Catholic understanding of this passage.