

The coming of Christ at the end of time connects the season of Advent to that of Ordinary Time. The latter has just concluded with the feast of Christ the King and its focus on Christ's ultimate reign as shepherd and sovereign of all. Today Jesus issues an urgent call for his listeners to be vigilant, to be awake and ready for the day of the Lord.

The call to watch for the coming of the Lord may seem like a threat, but it is meant to challenge us to be fully alive in the here and now. When Jesus first emerged from obscurity into the public arena, his clarion cry was to "repent and believe in the good news" (Mk 1:15). That's the point of repentance: to let go of the ways of death in order to freely embrace the gift of life.

In some contrast to the agitation of the gospel, the prophet Jeremiah reassures his hearers with God's promise of a new era, and the apostle Paul prays for and appeals to the Thessalonians with loving devotion. Along the way the psalm offers us a timely opportunity to renew our trust in the goodness of God.

Thus 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.'

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.

First Reading

Jeremiah was called to prophesy at a time when all that God's people saw as signs of God's covenant love for them – the land, the temple, the king – was under imminent threat. It may well have seemed like the end of the world. It's fitting to have a reading from this anguished prophet at the beginning of Advent while the Church's focus remains on the tumult of the end-time.

Today's short passage, from chapter 33, is more or less a repetition of verses 5-6 in chapter 23. The text may have been added after the people had been deported to Babylon, just as Jesus' reported words about the destruction of Jerusalem in Luke 21 post-date the event.

What we have here is a message of encouragement. Through the prophet, the Lord promises his people, now languishing in exile, a future ruler from the house of David who will reign with honesty and integrity. The oracle concludes, however, with the reminder that it is the Lord who is the ultimate source of justice.

It may help readers to know that there is an echo of this reading in the great song of praise that Luke puts on the lips of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist (Lk 1:67-79, especially the first few verses). The image of the branch (or shoot) also inspired one of the so-called "O antiphons" for the *Magnificat* just before Christmas. Readers should readily convey the comfort and assurance this text offers.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 24/25 is a prayer to God from an individual who is struggling with a difficult situation. The psalmist prays for guidance and help, as well as forgiveness for past failures. The three verses selected all breathe a calm spirit of confident trust, though elsewhere in the psalm there are heartfelt pleas for help.

The response, taken from the opening line of the psalm, invites us into an attitude of prayerful trust. Being so brief, the risk is that it may be rushed. Readers should announce it with proper deliberation, so as to cue the congregation into a thoughtful repetition. Prayed slowly enough, it will enable everyone to make the psalmist's personal faith their own.

As set out, the first verse is in the form of a petition addressed to God. The remaining two verses serve as a declaration, a simple confession of faith in the loving-kindness of God. The tone readers will naturally adopt is one of trust in the faithful love of God.

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

Paul's first letter to the Christian community at Thessalonica was written about the year 51, some two decades after the death of Jesus, making it the oldest book of the New Testament. It is somewhat exceptional in not being prompted by reports of internal divisions or false teaching. While he does address the issue of the Thessalonians' premature expectations of the Saviour's return, the tone of the letter is consistently warm and affectionate.

The focus on the second coming explains the use of the letter for this first Sunday of Advent; it matches the gospel reading on the "end times". The reading falls into two parts. The first is a prayer overflowing with love and goodwill that Paul offers for the community. While short, each of the two sentences is relatively long. Readers need to vary their expression to help the congregation distinguish between the core thought and its development.

The second part introduces the two chapters of advice for Christian living with which Paul concludes the letter. Readers should aim at communicating the earnestness and authority of Paul's exhortation. The first sentence of this section is quite long with a number of supplementary clauses. The key phrase for all to hear is "the life that God wants". Overall the reading is an expression of Paul's deep feeling and faith.

Gospel

Chapter 21 of Luke's gospel serves as a bridge. It brings Jesus' public ministry to a close and ushers in the passion narrative. Apart from the opening and closing verses the entire chapter is an apocalyptic discourse, invoking cosmic imagery to warn of the fall of Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man. Most scholars argue that Jerusalem had been destroyed before the gospel was written.

Today's passage forms the latter part of the discourse, on the upheaval of the day of the Son of Man. The short parable of the fig tree has been omitted. The speech draws on the dramatic language and imagery of prophetic pronouncements that would have been familiar to Jesus' and Luke's contemporaries. Depicting the awesome turmoil of the end-time in such sensational terms serves to highlight the even greater majesty and power of the Son of Man.

Ultimately the stark warning to be alert and on guard is not aimed at striking fear into the hearts of believers but to call them to faith in the ultimate authority of the Son of Man. "Stand erect", they are told, "hold your heads high, because your liberation is near at hand". Christian disciples are ever alert for and ready to claim the freedom that is theirs as the children of God.