

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT – YEAR C

(Jr 33, 14-16; 1 Th 3, 12 - 4, 2; Lk 21, 25...36)

(Excerpts from Pope Francis - 29 November 2015)

by Father Charles Fillion,

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Brothers and sisters, it is always striking to begin Advent in this way, for inevitably Advent puts Christmas in mind, and in many places the wider culture is already raising up the gentle images of Christ's birth in Bethlehem. However, the liturgy takes us to such images by means of others that remind us that the same Lord born in Bethlehem "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead," as the Creed puts it.

In the readings of this Sunday's liturgy, we can see different aspects of this salvation proclaimed by God; they appear as signposts to guide us on our mission. First of all, the happiness promised by God is presented as justice. Advent is a time when we strive to open our hearts to receive the Saviour, who alone is just and the sole Judge able to give to each his or her due.

Here as elsewhere, countless men and women thirst for respect, for justice, for equality, yet see no positive signs on the horizon. These are the ones to whom he comes to bring the gift of his justice (cf. *Jer* 33:15). He comes to enrich our personal and collective histories, our dashed hopes and our sterile yearnings. And he sends us to proclaim, especially to those oppressed by the powerful of this world or weighed down by the burden of their sins, that "Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called, 'The Lord is our righteousness'" (*Jer* 33:16). Yes, God is righteousness; God is justice. This, then, is why we Christians are called in the world to work for a peace founded on justice.

The salvation of God which we await is also flavoured with love. In preparing for the mystery of Christmas, we relive the pilgrimage which prepared God's people to receive the Son, who came to reveal that God is not only righteousness, or justice, but also and above all love (cf. *I Jn* 4:8). In every place, even and especially in those places where violence, hatred, injustice and persecution hold dominance, Christians are called to give witness to this God who is love. In encouraging the priests, consecrated men and women, and committed laity who live, at times heroically, the Christian virtues, we must realize that the distance between this demanding ideal and our Christian witness is at times great. For this reason, I echo the prayer of Saint Paul: "Brothers and sisters, may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all men and women" (*I Th* 3:12). Therefore, what the pagans said of the early Christians will always remain before us like a beacon: "See how they love one another, how they truly love one another" (Tertullian, *Apology*, 39, 7).

Finally, the salvation proclaimed by God has an invincible power which will make it ultimately prevail. After announcing to his disciples, the terrible signs that will precede his coming, Jesus concludes: “When these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (*Lk 21:28*). If Saint Paul can speak of a love which “increase and abound”, it is because Christian witness reflects that irresistible power spoken of in the Gospel. It is amid unprecedented devastation that Jesus wishes to show his great power, his unsurpassed glory (cf. *Lk 21:27*) and the power of that love which stops at nothing, even before the falling of the heavens, the inferno of the world or the roaring of the seas. God is stronger, more powerful, than anything else. This conviction gives to the believer serenity, courage and the strength to persevere in good amid the greatest hardships. Even when the powers of Hell are unleashed, Christians must rise to the command, their heads held high, and be ready to brave blows in this battle over which God will have the last word. And that word will be one of love and peace!

Of course, the Eucharist itself which we celebrate on this first Sunday of Advent, is the community’s most intense preparation for the coming of the Lord, for it is this coming itself that it manifests. I like to draw your attention to the Preface prayer that begins the Eucharistic Prayer on this Sunday, where the community presents itself before God as “we who watch.” We who watch ask that already today we may sing the hymn of all the angels. In proclaiming the Mystery of Faith we express the same spirit of watching: “When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, O Lord, until you come again.” In the Eucharistic Prayer the heavens are open and God comes down. The one whose body and Blood we receive today is the Son of Man that the Gospel declares who will come in a cloud with power and great glory. With his grace delivered in holy Communion it may be hoped that each one of us can exclaim, “[I will] ‘stand up and raise [my] head, because [my] redemption is drawing near’.”