

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

First Sunday of Advent

Year B

3 December 2023



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

The coming of Christ at the end of time serves as the bridge between Ordinary Time and the season of Advent. Today's readings conspire together to set the tone. Jesus issues an urgent call for his listeners to be vigilant, to be awake and ready for the day of the Lord. His appeal dovetails with Isaiah's heartfelt prayer for God's return. The prophet makes this plea on behalf of his people, all too conscious of their having turned away from God. The psalm gives voice to their desire – and ours – to turn back to God and find life in him. By contrast with this focus on vigilance and repentance, the apostle Paul invites the Corinthians to share his own spirit of thankfulness and confidence in God's faithfulness.

The call to watch out for the coming of the Lord may seem like a threat, but 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. The first Sunday of Advent repeats the invitation Paul gave to the Corinthians, to be thankful for "all the graces you have received through Jesus Christ" and to be "steady and without blame until the last day".

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 63:16–17; 64:1, 3–8

You, Lord, yourself are our Father,
Our Redeemer is your ancient name.
Why, Lord, leave us to stray from your ways
and harden our hearts against fearing you?
Return, for the sake of your servants,
the tribes of your inheritance.
Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come
down
- at your Presence the mountains would melt.
No ear has heard,
no eye has seen
any god but you act like this
for those who trust him.
You guide those who act with integrity
and keep your ways in mind.
You were angry when we were sinners;
we had long been rebels against you.
We were all like men unclean,
all that integrity of ours is like filthy clothing.
We have all withered like leaves
and our sins blew us away like the wind.
No one invoked your name
or roused himself to catch hold of you.
For you hid your face from us
and gave us up to the power of our sins.
And yet, Lord, you are our Father;
we the clay, you the potter,
we are all the work of your hand.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 79:2–3, 15–16, 18–19

R. Lord, make us turn to you, let us see your face
and we shall be saved.

○ shepherd of Israel, hear us,
shine forth from your cherubim throne.
○ Lord, rouse up your might,
○ Lord, come to our help. **R.**

God of hosts, turn again, we implore,
look down from heaven and see,
Visit this vine and protect it,
the vine your right hand has planted. **R.**

May your hand be on the man you have chosen,
the man you have given your strength.
And we shall never forsake you again:
give us life that we may call upon your name. **R.**

First Reading

Of all the books of the Old Testament (apart from the psalms), none is used more often for the Sunday readings than Isaiah. This is especially so at Advent and Christmas. That's because Isaiah offers an unparalleled vision of hope in many passages full of promise and reassurance.

Scholars tell us that we should speak of the “books” of the prophet Isaiah, for what we simply call the “book” appears to be a collection of writings from different historical periods. Today's passage comes from what is usually called “Third Isaiah”. It reflects the situation of the Israelites on their return from exile. Struggling to rebuild their homeland and their lives, they feel abandoned by God and plead for him to return to their aid, even as they confess their rebellion against him.

The reading begins and ends with God being addressed as “our Father”. This double affirmation establishes the frame – a “safety zone” – within which the people can make their plea and confess their sin with trust.

As is usually the case, readers would benefit from a careful look at the full text of Chapters 63 and 64 in their Bible. Knowing the context will help them manage the wide range of emotion found in this reading: trusting faith, urgent pleading, and profound lament for sin. Above all readers need to note that from start to finish the reading is a prayer addressed to God. Their task is to engage the whole congregation in the prayer and to draw them into the progression of its successive moods. It therefore needs to be proclaimed with a blend of deep reverence and personal intimacy and at a measured pace.

Elements of the reading are taken up in the New Testament. Jesus' teaches his disciples to call God “Father”; the apostle Paul quotes the verse “no ear has heard, no eye has seen” in 1 Cor 2:9, and he picks up the image of the potter in Rom 9:20. There are also links between the cry “Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down” and Jesus' baptism (see Mk 1:10), and between the quaking of the mountains (NRSV) and the death of Jesus (see Mt 27:51).

Responsorial Psalm

In the first reading the people pleaded with God to turn back to them. In the refrain of the psalm they pray the reverse, that God will make them turn back to him. Either way, it is God who makes it possible for the people to see his face and be reconciled to him. The initiative is entirely God's.

Psalm 79/80 is a plea for the restoration of Israel. Only a few verses are prayed but they are rich in biblical themes: God as shepherd of Israel, as warrior lord, and as vine-dresser. There's allusion to the ark of the covenant (“your cherubim throne”), to the role of the king as God's representative (“the man you have chosen”), and to the identity of Israel as God's own people.

Responsorial Psalm cont...

The refrain is relatively long. There needs to be a pause between the two parts of the petition to allow each its proper weight. Readers will need to ensure that the congregation doesn't mistake the first part for the whole refrain and respond prematurely. They can do this by the right combination of vocal tone and visual cue.

Overall the whole psalm is a heartfelt plea for divine assistance and should be proclaimed in that spirit.

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

1:3–9

May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ send you grace and peace.

I never stop thanking God for all the graces you have received through Jesus Christ. I thank him that you have been enriched in so many ways, especially in your teachers and preachers; the witness to Christ has indeed been strong among you so that you will not be without any of the gifts of the Spirit while you are waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed; and he will keep you steady and without blame until the last day, the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, because God by calling you has joined you to his Son, Jesus Christ; and God is faithful.

Second Reading

Most of Paul's letters are prompted by problems that have been reported to him, yet they begin with a greeting to the community and a prayer of thanksgiving. 1 Corinthians is no exception. In this case the greeting has become one of the options for the presider to use at the beginning of Mass.

Today's passage has been chosen for its reference to "the last day, the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" which the Corinthians are eagerly waiting for, the day when the Lord Jesus Christ will be revealed. This first letter of Paul's to Corinth is early enough for the expectation of the end times still to be strong. Paul seeks to arouse no fear or anxiety about the day of the Lord. On the contrary he implies confidence and hope, for God "has joined you to his Son" and "will keep you steady and without blame." Above all, "God is faithful".

It is only when we read the whole of the letter that we realise that even in the opening thanksgiving Paul is alluding to problems at Corinth. The wealth of spiritual gifts with which the community has been blessed has led, we find later, to divisions and rivalries. Nonetheless the reading as it stands is full of warm praise and encouragement. It should not present any major challenge to the reader, provided it is proclaimed steadily in a joyful spirit. Care may need to be taken with the second-last section ("and he will keep you steady . . .") as the phrases tend to pile up on top of one another.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

13:33–37

Jesus said to his disciples: 'Be on your guard, stay awake, because you never know when the time will come. It is like a man travelling abroad: he has gone from home, and left his servants in charge, each with his own task; and he has told the doorkeeper to stay awake. So stay awake, because you do not know when the master of the house is coming, evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn; if he comes unexpectedly, he must not find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake!'

Gospel

All three synoptic gospels include an account of Jesus speaking in Jerusalem about the end times before he enters upon the passion that leads to his death. The language of Jesus' discourse is full of foreboding: he warns of upheavals in heaven and on earth, of destruction and desolation, persecution and betrayal. All of these are features of the apocalyptic literature that seems to have been common enough in Jesus' day. Now it is all but impossible for us to disentangle where he (or the evangelist) is talking about the destruction of Jerusalem, about a final cosmic conflict, or about the coming of the Son of Man.

Three times we are warned to "stay awake!". It's the same admonition that Jesus repeats to Peter, James and John in the garden of Gethsemane, when he is facing his own "end time". His whole mission and his very life are under threat and he has to summon every ounce of energy to go on. Jesus wants us to be under no illusions as to what is at stake when the cost of discipleship confronts us. We need to be alert and ready to choose life.

An alternative translation of the scripture readings is given here from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). This may be particularly useful for those in parishes which use the NRSV Lectionary.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah 63:16–17; 64:1, 3–8

You, O Lord, are our father;
'Our Redeemer from of old' is your name.
Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways
and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?
Turn back for the sake of your servants,
for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage.
O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence.
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians 1:3–9

My brothers and sisters:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.
I give thanks to my God always for you
because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus,
for in every way you have been enriched in him,
in speech and knowledge of every kind—
just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—
so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift
as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.
He will also strengthen you to the end,
so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.
God is faithful;
by him you were called into fellowship with his Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 13:31–37

Jesus said to his disciples:

"Heaven and earth will pass away,
but my words will not pass away.

But about that day or hour no one knows,
neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

"It is like a man going on a journey,
when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge,
each with a particular task,
and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

Therefore, keep awake—
in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn,
or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

"And what I say to you I say to all:
Keep awake."

Concluding Prayer

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)