

1st SUNDAY OF ADVENT

St. Matthew 24:37-44

The Church has now entered into a new liturgical year and the season of Advent which begins the year. Advent is the four weeks by which the Church prepares herself to celebrate the birth of the Saviour of the world.

Just like the Blessed Virgin Mary, carrying the soon to be born Saviour of the world, and St. Joseph were driven away from the inn and left to seek refuge in a stable of animals, so the world has driven away the season of Advent and relegated it to an hour or so in near-empty churches on Sundays while it has stolen the trappings of Christmas for itself. And so why the faithful see that in that stable, heaven was found on earth, the world gathers at the inn concerned only with its own opinions and moods. Because what is a stable and what is an inn? An inn is the place of the world where it wallows in public opinion, runs after popularity, and drunkenly condemns all those who don't pander to their moods. A stable, however, is the place of animals, of the outcast, of those who because of public opinion either don't matter or are told that they are out of touch. The world says that what is great will be found in an inn. Yet the greatest was left abandoned to be born in a stable. What is true and noble is often found where we least expect it.

Advent is not the beginning of Christmas. Christmas begins with the vigil of the nativity of Our Lord, which is Christmas Eve. Advent is a season in which we prepare our souls for what is to come. It is, in fact, an exercise in preparing ourselves for the day of our death when we will face God Himself. It is why the Mass is celebrated in violet vestments, the same colour used at funerals. In times past, it was the custom that Advent would be celebrated in black vestments. It was a sign of the penance of the Church who, like the Israelites of

the Old Testament would dress in sackcloth and ashes awaiting the coming of the messiah. For while we are blessed to live in the age which knows the messiah to be Jesus Christ, we still live awaiting the coming again of Christ. It is because of this waiting that we do not sing the *Gloria* in the Mass because we still await to celebrate the birth of that child in whose honour and in adoration this was sung this song by the angels at Bethlehem. Yet unlike in Lent, we still do sing "Alleluia" because even though we await the coming of the birth of Christ, we know that the promise of salvation has already been fulfilled by God, and He whom we ask to come and save us, has saved us.

But still we must cry, as did the prophet Isaiah in the first reading, "Return, for the sake of your servants" (16:17) and beg God that He will, again, "tear the heavens open and come down" (64:1). We must confess with Isaiah that we are sinners, long been rebels against God and that our integrity has "withered like leaves" (64:6), so that then we can pray with the words of the psalm, "God of hosts, turn again, we implore, look down from heaven and see" (79:14).

The Church, and we the faithful, must reclaim Christmas and boldly live these days of Advent. This is our heritage, this is our culture, this is who we are. The world wants immediate gratification, it doesn't believe in waiting. It is why Advent, a season which is all about waiting, is so easily discarded and why, long before Advent began, has the world put up Christmas decorations. It doesn't have the patience or the faith to wait.

We can reclaim what is our own by resolutely entering into these weeks of Advent by prayer and penance. We need to clean our house if we are to welcome God Himself into our home. Do this by prayer and penance. For example, begin to pray each day, or, if you already do, add further prayers to your day. Maybe pray the Rosary, or at least one decade of the Rosary, using the joyful mysteries which tell of the annunciation and the birth of Our Lord. Take up acts of penance by, maybe, fasting one day a week or at least from one meal one day a week, or rather than buy a coffee each day, put that money aside and

use it buy a Christmas gift for someone you know who may be alone at Christmas. Certainly make time to make your confession before Christmas.

For those with young children, you can help them appreciate this season of Advent as a waiting for Christmas by the nativity scene you would have in your homes. Rather than placing all the figures in the nativity now, have the figures some way away from it, and then, each day, have the children move the figures a little bit closer until Christmas day. It will help to teach your children of the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem and it will help them to understand that in Advent the Church is waiting for Jesus to be born.

However you do this, recognise the beauty of Advent and the need we all have for this time. And reclaim this season so that we can claim Christmas again for Christ. If someone wishes you a “merry Christmas” now, thank them and wish them one as well, but maybe you could add to this, “and God bless you”.