

1st Sun Advent (B)

3rd December 2023

‘For You I wait all the day long’

Is 63: *O that you would tear the heavens open and come down
down from heaven and see*

Ps 79: *look*

1Cor 1: *waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ to be
revealed*

Mk 13: 33–37: *Stay awake, because you do not know when the
master of the house is coming*

Advent, though short, really is one of most *beautiful* of the Church’s seasons, and we should do our best to keep it well. The slightly subdued nature of the liturgy, with no *Gloria* sung, and the purple vestments, reminds us that it is a season to reflect, to prepare our hearts, to wait and long for the Lord to come. It’s not at all the same as that other ‘purple’ season of preparation, Lent, which is strictly penitential. No, this season’s purple is a purple of expectation, of *hoping and longing*, not of fasting and penance. In fact, in the Ambrosian Rite of the Church (celebrated in the diocese of Milan) the liturgical purple of Advent is a softer purple, more mauve, than the darker, more solemn, purple of Lent, to emphasize this very difference. Short though it is, it’s truly a holy season, to be *savoured* — held on to! — and not entirely lost in some generic pre-celebration of Christmas.

This Sunday introduces us to the fact that the prophet Isaiah will be a near-constant companion of ours through

Advent. Isaiah is a great prophet of Advent waiting. Today, in the Is 63/64 reading the people have returned from Babylonian exile, but with such post-exilic longings for God to return to the ruins of their Temple that their neglect of God had led to the destruction of. They are impatient for His return to them, even though He has already shown His eternal love for His people Israel by bringing to an end the exile more prematurely than they had envisaged. “*Oh that You would tear the heavens open and come down!*” they urgently cry to God. But they will have to learn to wait. God will act as He wills, in His own time, when He knows it is the right time. He *will* bring about their salvation in due course — the fullness of salvation, the restoration of the new Israel — but they will have to wait. In fact, they will have to wait a very long time. The words of Isaiah for us though Advent — weekdays as well as Sundays — will help us hold to that salvific, attentive, hopeful waiting that is characteristic of a mature faith. Isaiah reinforces the message of looking back to see God’s faithful actions as a reminder that He will remain faithful in the future, and will always act for the good of His people. “*You are the Potter,*

we are the clay,” Isaiah says of God, to remind us: we have to wait on Him to mould us aright, anew, when He wishes. He is in control. The timescale is His; no-one can rush Him!

Having got so used over the Sundays of the Church’s year ‘A’ (now ended) to passages from St Matthew’s Gospel — great parables, long passages, on recent Sundays from Mt 25, for example — suddenly in this new Church year we find ourselves plunged into *St Mark’s Gospel*, the crisp terseness of it, ... short, sharp, salient. Let’s hear again a few lines from that Gospel of this 1st Sunday of Advent, Year B (Year of Mark) —

³³ Be on guard, *keep awake*. For you do not know when the time will come ...

³⁵ Therefore *stay awake*

for you do not know when the master of the house will come, ... ³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: *Stay awake.*”

We begin Advent today, as always, not with *Christmassy* accounts of Mary, Joseph and Bethlehem — we’ve got a couple of weeks to go before that! We begin with something rather more from the *end* of the Gospel, something more about ‘the end’ — the ‘end times.’ In other words, before we begin to celebrate His *first* coming (at

Christmas, at Bethlehem), we note that we Christians are here and now awaiting Jesus’s *second* coming. If we are going to celebrate Christmas in a genuine way, then, we must recollect ourselves as honest, practising believers: that’s to say, ones who are keeping faith, ready and waiting, praying and present to Jesus in the here-and-now ... Otherwise Christmas simply becomes a historical pageant, recalling something past — like Guy Fawkes’ Day. But Christmas isn’t really about the past — Christmas is about the present, and the future. So we begin Advent being reminded about the *future*: the future is as much about the historical Christ as was the past, as was the first Christmas. The future is about Christ’s coming again; and we must be ready for Him! “*Stay awake,*” Jesus repeats several times in those short Gospel verses; “stay awake,” do not let your faith drift off or go to sleep. Be like someone waiting up for a loved one to return home at night (like, I’m sure, your parents have often done for you!) — focussed, attentive, not sleepy at all. That’s how we must always treat our faith in Jesus — as something that is *alive, active, keeping us alert, keeping us going* ... something that is really *present* to us;

for its meaning stretches back into our *past* — into the whole past of the Church’s centuries — but also stretches into the *future*, making sense of who we are and what on earth we’re about.

Our Lord’s words to us on this first Sunday of Advent are direct and leave us in no doubt. We are never told by Our Lord when the world will end, and we are never told by Our Lord when our own lives will end. But Jesus asks us to be ready anyway, at each and every moment, not to risk our eternal lives. “*If He comes unexpectedly, He must not find you asleep*”! Advent alerts us to this necessity. This season of waiting and preparation is all about locating the forthcoming celebration of Christmas in its more-important, wider context, the context of our lives ... our present, ... our future. It’s not about rushing headlong, unthinkingly, without waiting, into Christmas preparations, but about stopping, ... thinking, ... praying. It’s about reflecting on the actual meaning of Christ’s coming into the world — it’s to save *me*, to save the world! This I do need to *stop, wait, think, pray about*, don’t I? Advent gives us the chance for that, but only if we keep this holy season properly as the

Church teaches us to. May this Advent, with its hoping, waiting, and longing, give real impetus to our faith ... causing us to yearn lovingly for Christ, so that He be ‘born’ every day in our hearts, where we can nurture Him, tend and care for Him as the most welcome guest of our soul — our deepest love.

So let’s make a proper effort in this season to make a *prayerful, recollected, and charitable* preparation for Christmas, and not just focus on our own needs. Here are a few verses of a psalm long associated with the 1st Sunday of Advent. Note how it repeats the word “wait” ... Yes, let’s *wait* on the Lord this Advent for His patient, gentle, faithful blessing of us. Let’s not cut out the waiting ... the waiting on God is very important! Let’s not cut out Advent!

Ps 24 To You, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

² O my God, in You I trust;

let me not be put to shame;

let not my enemies exult over me.

³ Indeed, none who *wait* for You shall be put to shame; they shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴ Make me to know Your ways, O LORD; teach me Your paths.

⁵ Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation; for You I *wait* all the day long.