

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent (A)

30<sup>th</sup> November 2025

‘Advent: new from old’

*Is 2: The Lord gathers the nations into the eternal peace ... Ps 121: let us go rejoicing to the house of the Lord. Rom 13: salvation is nearer to us now ... Mt 24: 37–44: stay awake so that you may be ready ...*

It has been a beautiful thing, in these days — concluding the last Church year, and beginning this one — to follow online the first Apostolic visit abroad of His Holiness Pope Leo: he has been in Turkey since Thursday; and today he flies over to Lebanon. These countries, along with Israel and Syria, are the cradle of Christianity. To see Pope Leo sharing in emotional moments with our Orthodox brothers and sisters at Nicaea (site of the First Ecumenical Council of 325AD) and at Istanbul (site of the Second Ecumenical Council of 381AD and ancient patriarchal see of the Eastern Church) has been very moving. Yesterday Pope Leo and the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople signed a joint declaration of Christian commitment — East and West. This built on their visit to Nicaea on Friday where they commemorated together the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Council of Nicaea and its historic profession of faith, the Nicene Creed, clarifying in theological terms the full

divinity of Jesus. Pope Leo initiated the Church’s keeping the Advent season with Mass (in Latin, Greek, Armenian, Aramaic, English and Turkish) in a huge arena last night in Istanbul, and the Orthodox Patriarch was again present: a beautiful ecumenical gesture, reinforcing, as they said in their joint declaration, that their commemorations were:

“not simply to call to mind the historical importance of the Council [of Nicaea], but to spur us on to be continuously open to the same Holy Spirit who spoke through Nicaea, as we wrestle with the many challenges of our time.”

With the ‘new start’ of Advent today, it is lovely to see the new Pope in such places of old, and with our ancient brothers and sisters in Orthodoxy, making new and ever fresh expressions of hoped-for unity. If the Christian people of East and West are to witness to the divinity of Jesus Christ, His saving message, then our own lack of rancour and attempts at a unified, peaceful message are important. Isaiah prophesied in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. BC (and it begins our traditional Advent association with this great prophet):

*“they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and*

*their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”*

Yes, the first call of the first reading of Advent is to

*“Come, ... go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.”*

It is a call to God, to godliness, to peace-making, and to reflection. This was proclaimed in the *Armenian* language yesterday evening at the papal Mass in Istanbul, a reminder in itself of the universal nature of the Church, the people of God drawn from all the peoples of the world.

The beginning of Advent is not first and foremost about the run-up to Bethlehem, even though in the shops and in the streets it's being treated already as almost Christmas, or *actually* Christmas! It's not. These first 3 Sundays of Advent, and right up to 16<sup>th</sup> Dec, have a rather different feel: it's a properly *preparatory* season, one filled with longing. We *wait with hope*, and this is what should make the season especially beautiful; in fact, Advent is one of my favourite times of the year, when kept well. We find

that this 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent's theme is almost indistinguishable from end-of-year themes. What I mean is, that the end of one Church year 'dovetails' nicely into the start of the next. On the 33<sup>rd</sup>/34<sup>th</sup> Sundays of OT, and the ensuing weekdays, we considered themes such as: the End of Time, the Last Judgment, the Second Coming of Christ, His glorious Kingship. Well, guess what? Here we are, a new Church year begun, and we have a Gospel reading about judgment, “one taken, another left,” and the sudden return of Christ, “*the Son of Man coming at an hour you do not expect,*” so “*stay awake ... be ready.*” It all sounds remarkably similar to what we've just had and just finished. Is this a new beginning, a *fresh start* to our liturgical year? The start does seem very like the end! Yes, it's true, there is a sense of *continuity* as the end of one Church year merges into the new. Before we prepare to celebrate the 1<sup>st</sup> Coming of Jesus, we reflect that His 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming means that *we also* are learning to wait, to long, and to hope: that's what this 1<sup>st</sup> period of Advent is about (and it will involve a lot of Isaiah, the great prophet of

waiting). The 2<sup>nd</sup> period of Advent will be about St John the Baptist and the call to repentance. Only after 16<sup>th</sup> Dec will we get to angels, shepherds, stars and Bethlehem!

If the Church year has this annual cycle, one season more-or-less merging/dovetailing into another, might one be justified in claiming that we are just ‘going round in circles’? No, not at all. The Church’s annual cycle isn’t simply a ‘circular history,’ in which we get nowhere and end up back where we started. Think of the Church’s year as more like a helix, or corkscrew: yes, it takes us round the seasons, but at the same time driving us forward, like a boat’s propeller does. Our celebrating annually the various feasts and seasons in regular fashion does not leave us unmoved, but draws us forward spiritually, inching us towards the blessed destiny that is God’s desire for us. As Advent begins each year, we should be very happy that we are another year nearer heaven: the Lord who once came, will come again to complete His salvation, and call us even more fully into His Kingdom. If we take that analogy of the helix, or screw-propeller again, it’s only if we cease

that active motion of living the cycle of Christian seasons / Christian mysteries, that we find ourselves stuck, stopped from going forward, in the doldrums. The Church’s year carries her people forward in the direction of the King of the Cosmos, the Lord of History, not ‘round in circles’!

How should we greet this new Church year, this Advent season, then; how take ourselves forward in deepening love for the Saviour? I have a few ideas:

1. **Isaiah.** The great prophet of Advent, bringing a historical sense of the real moving forward / unfolding of God’s plan, is Isaiah. All the 1<sup>st</sup> readings of Advent Sundays this year are from Isaiah — he has much to say to us as we celebrate the 4 weeks of the season. But I’ll leave that till my Thursday talk (6.10, a ‘short talk before dinner.’)
2. **“Waiting/hoping/longing.”** These, I feel, are the *key words for Advent*. It’s a season with a palpable sense of ‘longing.’ Much as a small child has such eager anticipation for his/her birthday — how long and slow the wait! — so that’s us in Advent, waiting with keen longing, wanting the birth of Christ to come! ... but *willing* to wait, to experience the suspense, the heart expanding as it patiently allows God to

fulfil His will “when the fullness of time had come.” Of course, our end of term demands some celebrations — we’ll have ours at NH this coming Friday evening, and it’s right that we be together in joy and thanksgiving for the term we’ve had — but as best we can, even so, let’s *keep Advent as Advent*, a time of preparation and waiting.

3. **Prayer** ... is always the key, isn’t it, to entering fully into any season with faith? With the end of term approaching, and significant deadlines for essays and other projects and assignments, it’s not an easy time of year — but then neither is any time of year! Set yourself a little extra to keep for Advent. Maybe it’s to make a better effort to attend **weekday Mass**, especially as term eases off. Or come to the Advent **Holy Hour** this Thursday. A very special event is our **Carol Service**, taking place tomorrow, 1<sup>st</sup> Dec, at the lovely church of the Assumption about 20 mins’ walk from here near Piccadilly Circus. The Carol service is *not* Mass, but a sequence of music and readings that allows us to reflect prayerfully in the Word of God, and in song, the message of Christmas coming. It’s very lovely — don’t miss it! It’s an *ideal chance* to bring your friends, Christian or not, to something blessed with the beauty of the Gospel.

4. **Fasting.** Fasting? Really? Well, maybe ... Advent is different to Lent, for sure. The purple of Advent isn’t the same purple of preparation in *penitence* that we put on in Lent when we ‘give something up’ as a matter of course. No, the purple of Advent is the purple of preparation in *expectation*, longing and hope. Whatever approach you take to ‘fasting’ in Advent, a good option would be to find some simple **spiritual reading** for these 4 weeks ahead. Our free Advent reflection book, *Always Starting Over* that you’ll receive after Mass, would be a good place to start.
5. **Confession.** Advent is a season highly suited to making proper time for Confession, whether that’s here in London before the Christmas vacation, or once you have gone away for Christmas (if you are). Fr Ivano and I will keep to our usual slots for Confession (Sunday 6–7pm and Monday 6–7pm) right up to Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> Dec. I’m always willing to be asked, or e-mailed, for an appointment for Confession, too, and will make time for that, for you. It’s not always possible on the spur of the moment, but sometimes it is.
6. **Giving (tree).** I’ll leave that to Sr Carolyn to announce ...  
St Paul: “*You know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep ...*” Yes, let’s wake up, take Advent seriously!