

Homily for 1st Sunday of Advent, Year A

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Readings: Isa 2:1-5; Ps 121(122); Rom 13:11-14; Matt 24:37-44

Theme: Stay Awake, Walking in the Light of the Lord.

Advent comes from the Latin *adventus*, which simply means 'coming.' Advent celebrates two 'comings'; the coming of Jesus Christ at Christmas and the *Parousia*, the final coming at the end of time. So, while we prepare ourselves to welcome Jesus anew at Christmas, we anticipate his coming at the end of time. The coming of Jesus demands our attentiveness because we do not know when he will come.

Except for sleepwalking which is generally seen as a disorder, ordinarily walking involves an active conscious engagement of the whole person. To walk, one has to be awake, conscious and active. Walking also means that the person sees where they are going and therefore requires either the light of day or some artificial light to dispel darkness to walk effectively. On this first Sunday of Advent, the readings invite us to be awake and consciously walk in the light the Lord has given us in Christ.

Our first reading is from the beginning of the prophet Isaiah chapter two. The first five verses describe a universal messianic kingdom. The first verse gives the context of the prophecy which follows – the word that Isaiah, the son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. The prophecy is primarily about Judah and Jerusalem but suddenly expanded to include all peoples and nations of the world. This same prophecy from verses 2-5 with the exact wordings is contained in Micah 4:1-3. Therefore, some scholars argue about who copied from who or whether a later redactor added the text to the Isaiah prophecy. That is beyond the scope of this reflection. The content of the message was so strong that it was contained in both prophets. Let us highlight a few points.

First, it shall come to pass in the latter days. [בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים] Be'acharith hayyamim, literally means 'the end of the days.' And could also be translated as latter days, future days or last days. The prophets often used this term to refer to when the world would be set right, and people begin to worship the one true God again (cf. Jer 48:47; Eze 38:16; Hos 3:5). The Hebrew usage means that before the world comes to an end, all peoples and nations will turn to God. This will happen when the Messiah comes. Second is the relationship between the mountain of the Lord and the temple of Jerusalem. In those last days, the prophecy draws a link between the physical place of worship and the dwelling place of God. The Jerusalem temple was situated on what is called the Temple Mount Isaiah calls it the mountain of the house of the Lord [בֵּית־יְהוָה] Beth Adonai, which also means the temple. This physical temple will be established as the highest of the mountains, lifted above the hills, and all nations flow to it. Here, Isaiah is no longer talking about the physical temple but the dwelling place of God himself, where all nations will worship God. There is a shift from the earthly temple to the heavenly temple here. No longer the physical Jerusalem temple but a universal call to worship God. Hence, it shall be lifted above every mountain on the earth.

Third, the reasons why everyone should go up to the mountain of the Lord. All peoples will turn to this mountain for God to teach them his ways to walk in God's paths. There they will learn the law of God, and the word of the Lord will come forth from Jerusalem. Here there is an implicit reference to the coming of the Messiah, which will be fulfilled in Jesus. Also, on that mountain, God will judge between the nations and bring about a reign of peace. There will be no more wars, and instruments of war like swords and spears will become productive tools for farming. The call, therefore, is not just to the house of Jacob but to us, even today, 'come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.'

The clarion call in the gospel is to stay awake. The context of Matthew 24 refers to the end of the world and does not suggest that there will be a time before the end when there will be rapture. Some preachers have used the idea of rapture to instil fear in the minds of Christians

as if it is an event that will occur soon. Some have even given dates when the rapture will take place. Jesus is very clear in Matt 24 that no one knows when the events he described will take place. Jesus insists that we must be ready at all times. He says, 'Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.' (Matt 24:42-44). Using the example of the days of Noah, Jesus tells his disciples why they must stay awake. In the days of Noah, before the flood, people ate and drank and ignored the message preached to them until the flood came and swept them away. In the same way, if the disciples of Jesus are not ready at the Parousia, one man will be taken from among two men working in the fields and one woman taken from among two women grinding at the millstone. Therefore, the disciples of Jesus must stay awake lest the Lord comes like a thief in the night.

In the second reading, Paul gives four reasons how the Christians should stay awake. First, they must know the nature of the present time (*kairos*) because salvation is nearer now. Therefore, they must prepare themselves through repentance for the Lord's coming. Second, they must wake from sleep, which in Greek also refers to spiritual apathy. Third, they must cast off the works of darkness, which includes the absence of moral and spiritual renewal and living under the power of evil (cf. Eph 6:12). And finally, they must put on the armour of light to be able to stand against the schemes of the devil (cf. Eph 6:11).

On this first Sunday of Advent and as we prepare for Christmas, let us stay vigilant against the devil's tricks and pay attention to the gospel in anticipation of the Lord's coming, not just at Christmas but lest he calls us back home at any time.