



READERS' NOTES
FOR THE
SUNDAYS OF ADVENT
YEAR C

ADVENT

First Sunday of Advent

Your liberation is near at hand.

The Word This Week

As usual, the great Season of Advent begins, not by talking about Christmas, but about the Second Coming. We've had this theme already for the past two weeks, but there is a slight change of emphasis in the Scripture readings offered for this Sunday: here the tone is positive: it is the promise of what is to come that we contemplate. Even in the Gospel, though it talks of the dreadful signs that mark the end times, we hear of a promise - liberation. For this we should stand erect and hold our heads high. The central theme is that we welcome the coming of a person - Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, and this is what links this Sunday to the coming feast of his birth: we are now preparing to celebrate how he once came: may these preparations also help us to prepare for him when he comes again.

First Reading:

Jeremiah 33:14-16.

This passage is taken from a section of Jeremiah called the Book of Consolation. The prophet offers words of comfort and hope to a people destroyed by war and exile. It talks of a future - both Israel's future and our future - when God's promises will be fulfilled. Advent is about enthusiasm, as we await the Messiah. Therefore it is good to read with enthusiasm: 'See, the days are coming...' is a call to people to share in the prophet's vision, to share the enthusiasm he already feels. The poetic part which follows this introduction should be read carefully: it would be all too easy for the congregation to miss the basic idea. Underline the key concepts - 'the virtuous branch', the fact that Judah 'shall be saved', and what Israel will dwell in, 'confidence'.

Second Reading:

1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2

This reading suffers from a severe lack of punctuation! Just reading the sentences as written will not enable people to understand them. The reader will need to rehearse short pauses and longer pauses, as well as stress and emphasis, so that the meaning is clear. Take the first sentence as an example: 'May the Lord be generous/in increasing your love // and make you love one another/ (and the whole human race) //as much as we love you'. Underline the reference to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ - note that it's 'when', not 'if' - emphasise it accordingly. Also use words like 'urge' and 'appeal' to add colour and variety to your reading - allow your tone of voice to let Paul speak to your people. Don't ignore the use of silence in a reading like this. Pauses after emphatic sentences can be very powerful: try one after 'the life that you were meant to live', before continuing with the words of encouragement.

Second Sunday of Advent

All mankind shall see the salvation of God.

The Word This Week

Again we hear about the coming 'Day of Christ', and meet the character of John the Baptist. Just as once before he 'prepared the way' for the coming of Christ, so today he does the same for us. Our hearts should be open to his voice as he calls us to repentance and asks us to make the way straight for the coming of our Lord. The imagery of this Sunday is particularly rich: the dominant image is of a vast population moving together - the return from exile in the first reading, the going and coming of the sowers in the psalm, the community of the Church preparing together in Paul's letter. We prepare for the coming of the Lord as his people - a community which cooperates to make the 'processional way' of the Holy One - flattening the hills of opposition and ridicule, filling in the valleys of doubt and despair, so that 'all mankind shall see the salvation of God.'

First Reading: *Baruch 5:1-9.*

This marvellous, exultant hymn paints a glorious picture of a homecoming: the people of Israel coming home from their exile. It addresses the deserted city of Jerusalem as if she is a mourning mother who has lost her children. The reading says 'Get up - look! Here they come!'. Picture a woman leaping up from her tears to peer through the windows - and imagine the joy when she sees her children marching towards her. This is the tone you must capture in this reading. It is in three parts: first, the exhortation to Jerusalem to take off the mourning clothes and put on jubilant vestments. Then ('Arise, Jerusalem...') the invitation to see the homecoming - which is surely the most powerful part of the reading. Then ('Though they left you...') is the description of the journey, especially highlighting the role of God, who brings them back. In your mind, highlight all the joyful words in this reading - really tell this story.

Second Reading: *Philippians 1:3-6. 8-11.*

Paul here encourages the Philippians not to give up in their preparations for the 'Day of Christ' which offers perfect goodness and glory. As usual with Saint Paul (or his translator) the sentences are quite difficult to read with meaning - watch especially the sentence beginning 'My prayer is that your love...'. It's only by a careful use of pauses that this will come across to your listeners as anything sensible. Don't be afraid to use the word 'you' in these readings. Paul's letters were written to be read out loud to a congregation gathered for worship, and so the 'you' is quite deliberate. You are to be the vehicle of Paul's words, the messenger, delivering them to your Church today, just as someone first delivered them some 1,940 years ago. As an exercise, try reading this to a friend, using these words as your words - this will help you to get the pauses and emphasis right.



Third Sunday of Advent

What must we do?

The Word This Week

This Sunday is called 'Gaudete' Sunday, 'Rejoice' Sunday. This comes from the readings we hear today and it underlines an important point. In the Gospel we hear John the Baptist telling different groups what to do - they must repent, and change their lives. We might think of this as a rather joyless thing - something which is hard and unrewarding. The message of this Sunday is that repentance and changing our lives to welcome Jesus is something richly joyful. When we are planning to welcome anyone we love to our homes, we set about cleaning and preparing for their visit with enthusiasm - nothing is too much trouble for someone we care for greatly. Even scrubbing the bath or polishing the furniture can be a happy and joyful thing! The message of this Sunday is that preparing to welcome the Lord - even though it may involve hard work - is something utterly joyful, because of our love for him, and his love for us.

First Reading: *Zephaniah 3:14-18.*

There is a remarkable image in this reading: 'The Lord your God... will dance with shouts of joy for you'. Play with this image in your mind for a while, picture it, and see how it makes you feel! How would you set this reading to music? What sort of music would it be? Surely something triumphant and dancing, full of energy and irrepressible enthusiasm! You don't need music to convey such an understanding of these words - without going over the top, it's not difficult to 'paint the picture'. Just be careful not to get carried away - such a reading still needs to be delivered at a steady pace. Notice that there are two sections to this reading: the first half talks about what has happened - the Lord is in Jerusalem, the sentence is repealed. The second half talks about the future, when God's work will be completed, and the wonderful news comes to the Holy City.

Second Reading: *Philippians 4:4-7.*

It's amazing how sometimes the simplest words are full of comfort. The first sentence of this reading is such a phrase: 'I want you to be happy...'. Perhaps you could spend some time quietly saying these words, over and over again, and seeing how they make you feel and think about our God. Paul is speaking very simply and clearly in this reading, which means it presents few problems. It should be taken very slowly - making sure that these simple words get lodged deep into people's minds and hearts. There is also a great tenderness in what Saint Paul is saying. In your mind, put a full stop after 'prayer and thanksgiving' and treat 'That peace of God, which is so much...' as a separate sentence. This reading can offer a moment of peace and beauty to your congregation: read it with sensitivity and care.



Fourth Sunday of Advent

Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?

The Word This Week

It's only in this last week before Christmas that we begin to hear about the 'Christmas story' itself. For the past weeks we have been preparing ourselves to greet the Lord, when he comes. Now we prepare to remember how he first came - by listening to the prophecies of his coming and by hearing of the events before his birth. We meet the woman, Mary, who herself had been prepared for the coming of the Messiah. She has received the angel's greeting, and his strange news, and has accepted her role in God's plan. Now she hurries to her kinswoman, Elizabeth, who herself bears John the Baptist in her womb. John, just as we heard last week, alerts us to the presence of the Lord, as he leaps for joy in his mother's womb. His joy is that God has kept his promise and is with his people.

First Reading: *Micah 5: 1-4.*

This prophecy speaks of Bethlehem, the place where the Messiah was to be born. He was to be the ruler of Israel, and the bringer of peace. This should be read with a certain solemnity: it is a proclamation, much of whose impact comes from our knowledge of 'what happened next' - of the fact that this prophecy was fulfilled. Take this slowly, sentence by sentence. The first four lines are clear; then comes a reference to the ancient past - the long line of descent of the Messiah. The next two lines talk of the waiting for the Messiah to come, and then we hear what the Messiah will do: he will reunite the people, he will feed his flock, he will give security. All this should be proclaimed with a powerful confidence. Save something for the last line, however, perhaps even dropping your voice slightly for he himself will be peace. This is such a poetic line - so full of truth and the wonder of Christmas. Enjoy it.

Second Reading: *Hebrews 10:5-10.*

This is not easy. The reading is making a point about the Old Law of Israel (of performing animal sacrifices and oblations) being superseded by the New Law - where the perfect offering is a life of obedience. Jesus Christ, the one who took flesh in the womb of Mary, is perfectly obedient to his Father, and therefore is the perfect sacrifice. His 'Here I am', which he uttered by emptying himself of the glory of godhead to take human flesh in a woman's womb, is the sacrifice that fulfils all the prophecies and promises of the Old Law (or Old Testament). The first part, quoting what Christ said, is easy enough - just remember he is talking to his Father. The bit you have to be extra careful with is the second half: 'Notice that he says...'. This is meant to be an explanation of the first half: it is all to do with the two sacrifices - that laid down by the Law (Old) and the 'Here I am' of Jesus (New). Ask if you're not sure.

