



READERS' NOTES FOR THE SUNDAYS OF ADVENT YEAR B

ADVENT

First Sunday of Advent

Stay awake, because you do not know when the master of the house is coming

The Word this Week

Advent opens with a great cry, and a great promise: 'Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down!' is the cry, of a people who need God. The master is coming is the promise, not to breed fear, but to answer our cry. Advent begins, not with thoughts of the past, with the coming of the Lord we celebrate at Christmas, but with the future, and the promise that He is coming back. We are encouraged to treat every day as the day the Lord will come; we do not do this out of fear for a Master who beats his servants, but out of love of a Master who always treats us with love and mercy. Nevertheless we must always be watchful, because we can grow sleepy and complacent, saying that we can leave this prayer or that confession or the other change in the way we live to tomorrow. Even as we look forward to the tomorrow of the Lord's coming, we must remember that it might be today!

First Reading

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1.3-8.

This is a great prayer and cry, of confession, of trust and hope. There are four parts: first we have the cry or pleading of the prophet - almost upbraiding God for his absence. The reader must allow the 'Why ?' on line three to ring out - and then the same is true of the single, dramatic word 'Return !' on line five. Then the wonderful and powerful line: 'Oh, that you would tear the heavens open...'; the power of this line will come from the reader's emphasis. (Use the '**Oh!**' when you read - don't be apologetic about it!). Secondly, we have a section which praises God for his Presence ('No ear has heard...') Pause slightly before the change of tone, and perhaps speak a little more gently. Then we have the confession of faults: ('You were angry...') perhaps a tone of sadness and regret would help to carry the meaning here. Finally, the last three lines are gentle affirmation of the reason for our hope: 'you are our Father.' The reading ends on a tone of positive confidence.

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 1:3-9.

As usual with Saint Paul, it is worth reading this passage out loud a couple of times in preparation - most of the second paragraph is a single sentence, and so is very difficult to read and to listen to! Look for the reason why this reading appears on the First Sunday of Advent: the key phrase is '...waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed...'. This is what we are doing. The reading reminds us that God offers us help while we wait - the gifts of the Spirit, and his sustaining care. This reading is encouraging. Be very careful with the last part of the reading: you may wish to read it like this: 'and he will keep you steady and without blame / /until the last day - // the day of our Lord Jesus Christ - // because God, // by calling you, // has joined you to his Son, Jesus Christ; // and God is faithful. Make those last four words especially powerful, by pausing slightly before them and delivering them with a tone of quiet confidence. This reading is important because the tone of comfort is the other side of the coin to the slightly threatening Gospel reading - we must stay awake, but God will help us!

Second Sunday of Advent

Make his paths straight

The Word this Week

Throughout the first three weeks of Advent our focus is very clearly on the Second Coming of the Lord - not so much on the run up to Christmas (until the last week). If we view Advent as a preparation for Christmas these readings will make little sense - and neither will the figure of John the Baptist who appears today. If it's about the preparation for Christmas then John the Baptist, preaching after Jesus was born, is a confusing figure: but his role is to preach to us, as he did of old, and to prepare us for the (second) coming of the Lord. Today we have a very graphic reference to the end of time and the Second Coming in the reading from Saint Peter; it is a frightening picture, and so the first reading offers tender words of comfort to help us understand who is coming, and why we should be ready to meet him.

First Reading

Isaiah 40:1-5,9-11.

A long but rewarding reading, full of comfort and hope: the coming of the Lord is a wonderful thing, a cause for rejoicing and gladness. Use the paragraph breaks in the Lectionary to divide the reading. The first paragraph is one of warmth, forgiveness and comfort for the heart of Jerusalem - take your time, and read with gentleness. The second paragraph is about building excitement - until the statement 'then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.' The third paragraph is about the joy of the one who sees the Lord coming, who comes to share the wonderful news with the people of Jerusalem. There should be a great sense of triumph in the words 'Here is your God' - think about what they mean, and how those words alone sum up this reading. Finally, there is a calmer section, where we see the picture of the victorious Lord coming with all the gentleness of a shepherd. A great image to end a great reading.

Second Reading

2 Peter 3:8-14.

All the readings today paint pictures for us - and this is a particularly vivid picture! You must be very careful not to go over the top with the description of the elements melting in the heat and so on. The central message in this reading (which can easily be missed with all the pyrotechnics surrounding it) is The Lord... wanting nobody to be lost... The Lord of the First reading, gathering the lambs against his breast, is the same Lord who is being patient with us all. Make sure when reading that this message is brought out. Also remember, as has been said many times before, when you proclaim a reading like this it is real *here and now*: when you say 'you' to the congregation, it is a real address. So the phrase 'you should be living holy and saintly lives while you wait' is what the Lord, through Peter and through the reader, is saying to the people sitting in front of you in Church. Don't ignore the wonderful words which sum up the waiting of Advent: What we are waiting for is what he promised: the new heaven and the new earth. Allow your tone of voice here to encourage the people to imagine and dream about what that new heaven and earth will be!



Third Sunday of Advent

"There stands among you, unknown to you, the one who is coming after me."

The Word this Week

So who is coming? This Sunday's readings help to answer that question. John the Baptist is asked about the coming of the Messiah - is it him? He affirms his role as 'a witness to speak for the light', by pointing to the one, who stands among the crowd unknown to them, who is coming after him. This idea is present in the First Reading, where Isaiah proclaims what the anointed one (Messiah in Hebrew) will do, and the joy that this will bring. It is interesting that the Psalm appointed for this Sunday is the Magnificat - Mary's song of praise at the announcement that the Messiah would be born of her - in which she sings of the works of the coming Messiah. Paul then reminds us that we are still waiting patiently: 'God has called you, and he will not fail you.' This is why, on this 'Gaudete' Sunday, we as God's people rejoice in his care, made visible in his promises, fulfilled in Jesus.

First Reading *Isaiah 61:1-2.10-11.*

This famous passage is the one Jesus applies to himself in the synagogue at Nazareth: in it we hear who the Messiah is, and what he brings. This Sunday is called 'Gaudete' Sunday - 'Rejoice' - because we are glad to hear about the One who is coming, and we rejoice that he comes. Your tone throughout should be glad and enthusiastic at the good things the Messiah brings, the second half, especially, should conjure up the picture of the glory and beauty of the One who Comes. When a reading is written out in sense-lines (as this one is) it is poetry; this demands a style of reading which is more reflective, more aware of the images presented. Similarly, when a reading has distinct paragraphs (as here), you should use the pauses that such spacing suggests. So, here, the final paragraph (For as the earth...) is a new image, and you should pause before announcing it, so that the minds of your listeners have a moment to adjust to a new idea. Whenever there is an analogy (...as a garden...so...) make sure that each half is clear and distinct. Think in terms of the pictures, and the reading will be easier to read and understand.

Second Reading

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24.

Paul is being brief and to the point today, so you can take your time, and announce each of his points clearly. First we have things to do - a list; it is good to pause slightly after each item, to allow people to slot it into their understanding. The next sentence is a prayer for the people ('May the God of peace...') Emphasise the words **perfect** and **holy**, then pause. Then emphasise **safe and blameless**, but leading on to the central phrase 'for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Then leave a slightly longer pause, before the wonderful final sentence: punch out the final words with great confidence - **he will not fail you**. Since this is such a short reading, read it with particular care and emphasis, always remembering that it is a list of ideas and concepts, and so will demand spaces throughout for the congregation to assimilate what is being said to them.



Fourth Sunday of Advent

"Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son."

The Word this Week

Here we enter a new stage of Advent: having spent so much time on the Second Coming, now we look back, to remember the details of the Lord's First Coming. Today we focus on the character of Mary, and hear of the angel Gabriel being sent to her, to invite her to take her part in the mystery of the Incarnation, the revelation of the mystery kept secret for endless ages. This mystery springs from the House of David, and so we lead into the Gospel by hearing of the establishing of that house. An interesting idea is that the first reading talks of David wishing to build a house for the Lord; through the prophet he is told, not of the house that he would build, but the House which is his line. Eventually, in Mary (betrothed to Joseph), the House of David does itself become the house of the Lord, the womb wherein he has a dwelling place.

First Reading *2 Samuel 7:1-5,8-12,14,16.*

The central point of the reading today is the establishing of the House of David. This is a prologue to the Gospel, pointing out the fact that it was God who established David's line, from which would come the promised Messiah. In a way the whole reading hinges on a play on words: David wants to build a house for God: God refuses this, but says instead He will build a House (line, family) for David, and that this line will last forever. It's easy to look forward to the story of the Nativity and see in that the conclusion to this story. The tone of this reading is very positive - it is a promise for David. The feeling of looking towards the future will be very easy for the reader to convey, especially in the sentences from 'The Lord will make you great' onwards. Special emphasis should be saved for the last line: '...your throne shall be established forever.'

Second Reading: *Romans 16:25-27.*

Typical Saint Paul: only three sentences in this reading, and the first one is really awkward! Notice the key words in the first sentence: 'Good News', 'revelation', 'mystery', 'broadcast' and 'faith'. The idea is simple: God's love has been hidden from the pagans and now that Jesus has come, as one of us, that secret or mystery is revealed. Paul's job is to broadcast it to all. This reading is important because it tells us a lot about what Christmas is: it is about revealing the hidden mystery. Just as a child is hidden in its mother's womb for the nine months of pregnancy, so was this mystery of God's love hidden for endless ages. But as the child is born and revealed to the world, so the mystery of God is revealed to the world in the birth of the child of Mary. Read this very slowly and deliberately, but with a great enthusiasm in your voice - it is about giving glory to God. People may not pick up the link to Christmas, so do your best to emphasise the words: '**...the revelation of mystery kept secret for endless ages...**' Even if people don't get the reference from you or the homily, there will be other similar references over the Christmas Season that may remind them of this. If at the end of the reading, people are going to join in saying 'Amen', don't worry about it - it just means they join in the glory given to God!

