

## BE AWAKE, ALERT, ACTIVE!

### First Sunday of Advent – Cycle A – December 1, 2019

Isa 2:1-5; Rom 13:11-14; Mt 24:37-44

*“It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep” (Rom 13:11)*

**Preface:** Today we begin the season of Advent, celebrating the First Sunday of the new Liturgical Year: Cycle A. Coincidentally, today is also the first day of the last month of the calendar year 2019—December 1—signifying crossing of a threshold in time. The regular readings of Cycle A will more specifically focus on the Gospel according to St Matthew, which appears first in the Second Testament but has not been written before the other gospels in time. Matthew portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets—the ‘New Moses’ who comes with superior teachings “to fulfill what was said and taught before him.” The 14-generational genealogy introducing the gospel according to Matthew not only shows that Jesus truly belongs to the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David; but that he is also the ‘new Moses’ and much-awaited Messiah.

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The word ‘Advent’, derived from Latin, refers to ‘coming’. The liturgy of the four Sundays of Advent prepare us to joyously celebrate the First Coming of our Lord, Jesus (birth in Bethlehem), even as they invite us to reflect upon Christ’s Second Coming (individual judgement at the end of our lifespans; and, final judgement at the end of the world). We can reflect upon scripture from three verbs which appear in the second reading (Letter to the Romans), as well as in today’s passage from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 24: (a) awake; (b) alert; (c) active. The Letter to the Romans is Paul’s longest one—written about the year 58 AD—to the church he had personally founded. He uses the imagery of sleep, night and darkness in contrast to waking up, light and being fully alive and alert. He reminds the new converts to Christ of their past life, comparing it to one who blissfully slumbers, unaware of what is happening around him. However, after they have accepted Christ, they are on the path of salvation and must therefore “lay aside the works of darkness” and “put on the armour of light” (13:12).
2. When Paul speaks of ‘time’ or ‘hour’, he is referring to Biblical time, which is God’s time—most often unknown and unexpected from our point of view. The believers in Christ have entered into a new timeframe—now, being no longer asleep, they are expected to be wide awake, alert and active in the service of God and neighbour. A similar caution is expressed in Paul’s exhortation to the Ephesians: “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead!” (Eph 5:14). Paul advises them not to be like children of the night, who indulge in drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy; but instead to be like military men, alert, who “put on the armour” of light. They are to leave behind their old ways of the so-called ‘pagan world’ and put on the robes of righteous living, which one dons through total acceptance of Christ and his command to love and to serve.
3. “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (Mt 24:42) warns Jesus in the gospel passage. Chapter 24 of Matthew’s gospel begins with Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, followed by talk about the

*'parousia'* or Second Coming of Christ. Here, too, we see echoes of the suddenness and the unexpectedness of God's intervention. The Flood in Noah's time was unexpected and swept away humankind with all its evil and wickedness. So will the Lord's Second Coming be—and yet, the disciples who are awake, alert and active, will find their hearts joyful and their lives fruitful since they have been doing precisely what they 'should' or 'ought' to be doing and are not immersed in enjoyments and ephemeral enticements that will surely pass away. Finally, to prove his point, Jesus gives the example of householders and burglars. Robberies are successful precisely because the houseowners do not know when the thief will break into their houses. Had they known the date and the time, they would have certainly stayed awake and active to stall the robbery and save their property.

### **Possible Link to the Theme in the 1<sup>st</sup> Reading and the Psalm:**

Isaiah's vision in the first reading: "Peoples without number will come ... and they will say, 'come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob'" (Isa 2:3) breathes hope. Isaiah preached in Jerusalem from 742-700 BC, when the northern tribes (Israel) were subjugated by Assyria in 722 AD and trusted more in their political alliances rather than in the power of Yahweh. They were warned about their waywardness, but refused to change. They were led to the doom of the Exile, loss of identity, community, etc. Nonetheless, Isaiah foretells that God will not abandon them and people will once again flock to the new Jerusalem or Zion. Another rousing refrain resounds in the responsorial psalm: "I rejoiced when I heard them say: 'Let us go to God's house'." (Ps 121:1).

### **A Text from Catholic Tradition**

From the 'Catecheses' of Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 315-386): "We preach not one coming only of Jesus Christ, but a second also, far more glorious than the first. .... In his first coming he was wrapped in swaddling clothes in the manger. In his second coming he is clothed with light as with a garment. In his first coming he bore the cross, despising its shame; he will come a second time in glory accompanied by the hosts of angels. It is not enough for us, then, to be content with his first coming; we must wait in hope of his second coming."

**Reflection on the need to be awake, alert, active:** To be awake and to be alert are successive, yet inseparable, moments in Advent-preparation. To awake is to be aware with one's mind and senses; to be alert is to activate one's whole body for action. Rising without mindfulness is sleepwalking; while, wakefulness without alertness and activity is daydreaming. Despite their vigorous walks and wishful visions, sleepwalkers and daydreamers arrive nowhere and achieve nothing. Jesus was always awake, alert and active. He expects that of you and me, too!

**In Lighter Vein:** It's said that when the Prince of Devils was training small devils to trap unwary believers, he sent them to earth to learn 'methods of deception' and return to report to him. On return, he asked what they'd learnt. One devil said, "I'll trick people by saying there is no heaven!" The second one said, "I'll deceive people by saying there is no hell!" .... The third little devil said: "We cannot deceive devotees by saying that there is no heaven and no hell since they all know that there *is*, indeed, both heaven and hell ... But we can tell them, 'take it easy; relax! eat, drink, be merry!'" That way we'll get them into hell. Wasn't the third one the smartest? Beware!

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