



## Advent Scriptures - week 1

### An Introduction to Advent plus commentary on the readings of the first week of Advent Year B

*Abridged from Advent reflections 2020 Fr Peter Sharrock, Diocese of Lancaster, UK*

#### Introduction to Advent

Like many things in our fast-moving times Advent tends to get ignored by society in its eagerness to have 'Christmas' NOW! And even, then, the feast begins in early December and ends with boxing day. However, we must not be too hard on the pagans, as we Christians stole our feast from them! Most cultures, most religions, have a celebration of light near to the point where the days stop becoming shorter and the light gives us hope. Our feast of 25<sup>th</sup> December was originally marked by the Romans as the feast of 'Sol Invictus' – the 'victorious Sun'. They were only a couple of days out from the 'shortest day' but you will notice the evidence of this connection in the Advent prayers.

#### Thoughts to ponder as we begin Advent

Firstly, we are Christians, so we are not pretending we don't know what we are preparing for, as we have celebrated it before. However, it is helpful to 'go back to the promises' so that we will see what God does in 'New Light' – so that we will appreciate the 'Victorious Son'.

Advent is not a month of just telling the 'Bethlehem story' in the readings of Mass. In fact, the infancy stories of the Gospels are not told until 17<sup>th</sup> December – and Mary is not mentioned on Sundays until the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent.

#### Advent Colours

Violet – the colour of Advent is a mix of other colours, principally red and blue. It is the right choice for Advent, since once mixed the colour becomes its own true self. The season of Advent is similar. The scripture readings are a blend, but in the end give us a definite theme. They are full of colourful images depicting the whole range of human feeling: longing, sorrow, anger, perseverance, fear, hope, love ambition, patience, suffering, enthusiasm, you name them, they are all there. In the end though Advent blends them all together to give an overall feeling which is one of 'waiting, for something to happen.'

People often mistake violet for purple, with colours, as with our own lives, we need to see what is really there; otherwise, we confuse the feelings we experience in life, misunderstanding what they mean. What is good and hopeful, can appear dull and disappointing, while what is bright and attractive, can turn out to be of little value. Advent encourages us to pause and look to see what is really before us. The colourful readings and images encourage us to be aware of the Kingdom of God unfolding in our lives and leave us waiting for God to fulfil his plans.

<b><i>Advent Readings are from Sunday Year B and weekdays Year 1</i></b>	
Ist Sun Advent – Mark 13:33-37	Let's make sure we are open to new light in what God has done for us – in the gospel Jesus says: <b><i>'Be on your guard, stay awake'</i></b>
Ist Tues of Advent – Isaiah 11:1-10, Luke 10:21-24	<i>A shoot springs from the stock of Jesse, a scion thrusts from his roots:</i> This Isaiah passage takes us back to the time of the Exile of God's people to Babylon. They didn't see it coming and lost all hope. In any difficult or seemingly impossible situation we need to retain hope that good will come. Hope is the number one word used in Advent, this Isaiah reading is a reflection of one man, a prophet who's faith gives him Hope. God never neglects what he has created, nurtured and loved! He will continue to look towards where he wants his people to have their origin: 'The root of God's work on earth will remain the people who have their origin in Jesse – the father of King David'. How can this be, as these people have failed? By the power of God and the hope of those who dare to hope -that's all! In later Advent gospels, listen for mention of 'David', 'House of David', Root of Jesse', it's part of the raising of memories to increase Hope in us of God's promises at this time.
Ist Wed of Advent – Isaiah 25:6-10, Matthew 15:29-37	<p>Today we find two phrases which are Advent themes – both are also reflected in the Gospel in the words and actions of Jesus. Firstly, in Isaiah we hear the words: <i>"The Lord will wipe away the tears from every cheek; he will take away his <b>people's shame</b> everywhere on earth."</i></p> <p>Shame disables people at a very deep level. It is built into many different areas of human life and is often caused and fed by other humans. Poverty, lack of opportunity, even personal sin can be holding people down in a way which seems to sap the very life from them. Interestingly, one of the expectations of the 'one who is to come' is to 'take away people's shame'. Dare they even pray that God would do this?</p> <p>In today's Gospel we see Jesus fulfilling these promises. When Jesus heals the miracle is not that bones are healed, or that eyes and tongues work properly again. The real miracle is that <i>'he is taking away his people's shame'</i> – they can now live life in society, earning their own money instead of begging, and able to play their part in religious life. It is not surprising then that <b><i>'large crowds came to him bringing the lame, the crippled, the blind, the dumb and many others; ... and he cured them.'</i></b> ...and then he fed them with 'next to nothing' – seemingly with more left over than before he started. This is our second Advent image – the promise that God would save us, on his mountain and throw a free and generous 'Banquet' for his people. At this stage in Advent it is worth noticing how over-exaggerated the images of what God is promising seem. But if we do not notice the over-generosity of God, the almost ridiculous promises God makes to us, then we will mix up God's promises with our expectations of others about us in our lives.</p>

**Advent Readings are from Sunday Year B and weekdays Year 1**

<p>Ist Thurs of Advent – Isaiah 26:1-6, Matthew 7:21,24-27</p>	<p>Today's Advent word is 'Security'. The scriptures do not use the actual word often, but the need for security appears throughout. Though not surprising for peoples who lived in this part of the world then it actually remains the continual prayer and concern of the people today.</p> <p>Security is important for all people, but exactly how do we go about creating it? We can wrap our family in armour and suffocate them socially, the usual way was to build thicker walls, higher battlements, thicker doors, bigger armies etc. In our Advent readings God is promoting another way. Isaiah speaks of 'upright nations', of those who are 'faithful', who prepare for 'peace', who 'trust in God'.</p> <p>In the Gospel, Jesus reminds us that it is not the strongest castles that will last; but <i>'the person who does the will of my Father in heaven'</i> these are the people who build on rock. Neither can people get away with saying 'Lord, Lord!' without acting in faith and in the way God does.</p> <p>Jesus was putting pressure on the religious groups who were suffocating the faith of the people. Jesus continually speaks of coming to set people free – including freedom from suffocating religion which keeps them from God. It takes a great leap of faith to believe in God's promises rather than building our own security. This is the reason we need Advent, and re-visit it each year.</p>
<p>Ist Friday of Advent – Isaiah 29:17-24, Matthew 9:27-31</p>	<p>In today's readings we meet two more important Advent words: 'sight' and 'hearing.' Isaiah tells us; <i>"The deaf, that day, will hear the words of a book and, after shadow and darkness, the eyes of the blind will see."</i></p> <p>Again Jesus picks up these Advent themes and turns them into tools for his ministry – he meets two blind men, who are 'following him and shouting'. Despite their blindness they could already 'see' something special in Jesus! Jesus asks them, somewhat surprisingly: <i>'Do you believe I can do this?'</i> Their cure is due to two things: the faith of those two men in Jesus; and 'such action is what we come to expect from the promises of God in the presence of the Incarnation!'</p> <p>Each of us need sight and hearing to notice where God is in our lives and our world, but we need to look properly, not half-heartedly, the scriptures are there to help us. We must remember and give thanks for the people of the past who have helped us notice God amongst us, and in turn share with others our experience of God amongst us, too.</p>
<p>Ist Saturday of Advent – Isaiah 30:19-21,23-26 Matthew 9:35,10:1,5,6-8</p>	<p>Today's Isaiah reading reveals that God is always open to his people recovering from failure and their ability to neglect God. More than this he is offering help to be who we were created to be. He invites his people of Zion to live in Jerusalem for that is where God touches the earth – even though they had wandered off to worship false Gods in the past. Maybe that's the great ability of God: He helps his people even though he is fully aware of their failure – actually, BECAUSE he is fully aware of their failure.</p> <p>In the Gospel we find that Jesus is offering the same warning and help as the Father has done in the past. This is also acted out in who Jesus is: <i>"Jesus made a tour through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom and curing all kinds of diseases and sickness."</i></p>

	<p>Many people today don't bother with religion 'because life is hard enough'. Life certainly is 'hard enough', and even harder for some. There are also aspects of what people call 'religion', including the way some Catholic Christians speak, which are not helpful to people who have hardships. So, Advent is a good time for us to re-visit the real God. Praying with scripture, the Word of God, is the way for us to meet the God who reveals himself to the world. When we live out the discovery of that reality others will notice and be curious too.</p>
<p>2<sup>nd</sup> Sun of Advent Isaiah 40:1-5,9-11 Mark 1:1-8</p>	<p>The Sunday Advent readings repeat messages heard in the previous weekday readings. They are a summary, or reminder of what is important to note. We seem to be looking at the same Isaiah readings through the eyes and ears and lived reality of the Hebrew people of John the Baptist's time.</p> <p>Sin can paralyse us – we know this. Similarly, a people who have, in total embarrassment, neglected God and so been overthrown and taken into exile by an invading power will take decades (Centuries?) to recover from their guilt – even though prophets will reinforce God's forgiveness and love for them. It may have been the need to 'feel forgiveness' which caused the Pharisee's insistence on rules and rigid signs of dedication to God? In the 'Sunday context' listen to Isaiah speaking God's word to the religious Jewish people just before the birth of Jesus. God is virtually shouting to the people: 'for crying out loud STOP THIS MOPING! What more do you want? You did wrong and I have forgiven you and still supported you! I gave you back your land – what more do you need to believe me?!'</p> <p>God is going to do something to humanise his people's response to his radical love. If someone important is coming to town we clean up a bit, build a memorial, in those days create a straight new road to let them know we want them to 'come quickly'. But the coming of this person is so important that they could imagine making that straight road out of town, into the desert, flattening hills and filling in the valleys – a mammoth task, demonstrating the importance of the visitor.</p> <p>in the Gospel, John, the baptiser repeats the importance of this visitor from God and stresses the immediacy of starting to prepare now.</p>