

The common theme of today's readings is that vigilant service prepares us for the coming of Christ as our Savior during Christmas and as our judge and Lord at the end of the world or our life. The reason why the liturgical year ends and begins with the same theme is clear:

If we have already embraced Jesus in his first coming, we will have no fear of his second coming. Advent is the season of special preparation for and expectation of the coming of Christ.

If we are awake and ready, the coming of the Son of Man is an event to be greeted with joy.

Thus, our whole life should be a preparation to meet the master. We base this constant watch not on fear but on hope in God's promise of eternal life.

+(5:15 Sunday eve Mass) This reminds me of when, as part of my seminary training, I was assigned at MCV as a chaplain in CPE training. With each visit to a patient, we had to type up a verbatim of what we said to a patient and this would be critiqued by everyone.

In my recall, there was one individual, who said to the patient, prior to her operation, "We should pray, as you never know what could go wrong." True, but one might take another, more positive approach, in offering such a prayer!

This gospel reminds us also that we should not be so foolish as to forget God and become immersed in worldly matters. Using Christ's parable, the Church reminds us of the alertness and preparation needed for the four-fold coming of Jesus into our lives, namely:

At the celebration of his Incarnation during this Christmas season, in his active presence in our daily lives, at the moment of our death, and in his final coming in glory at the end of the world.

Like the parents who trust their teenagers to look after the house while they are away, or like the teacher who leaves the classroom after giving her students plenty of work to do, Jesus trusts us to carry out his work until he returns. The theme, of course, is be ready.

+Readers Digest often prints some of life's most humorist moments: "Margaret was all ready for her date. She was wearing her best outfit, her hair was fixed, her makeup was perfect. Imagine her disappointment when her date didn't show up!

After an hour of waiting, Margaret decided that he wasn't going to come. She changed into her pajamas, washed off her makeup, gathered up a bunch of junk food, and parked herself in front of the television for the evening.

As soon as she got involved in her favorite show, there was a knock on the door. She opened it to find her handsome date standing on the doorstep. He stared at her in shock, then said in disbelief, "I'm two hours late, and you're still not ready?"

Like the great spiritual teachers of all times Jesus kept saying, "Wake up! Be ready!" He meant that by being asleep we were missing the wonder of what God was doing. As one doctor said, "I don't see how anyone can witness the birth of a baby, and not believe in God."

We need to recognize that Christ not only has come in the past, and shall come in the future, but he does continue to come now in the present.

Obviously, Jesus is trying to tell us about his final coming at the end of time... but he is also trying to open our minds to the truth of his coming to us in the events and experiences of our daily lives.

Surely, he is never far from us; and we should look for him, not just in the clouds of tomorrow; but in the streets of today. If we are aware of this, perhaps the first thing we need to do is to think of his coming, not as a threat, but as a promise.

If our heart is right and our mind is joyfully expectant, we will find Christ in many places—in the face of a child; in the need of other people, in our joys, and even in our sorrows.

+In his book *The Pressure's Off*, psychologist Larry Crabb uses a story from his childhood to illustrate our need to delight in God through adversity: One Saturday afternoon, at the age of three, decided he could use the bathroom without anyone's help.

Then it was time to leave. He couldn't unlock the door. He tried with every ounce of his three-year-old strength, but he couldn't do it. He panicked and began to call out. His parents—and likely the neighbors—heard his desperate scream.

"Are you okay?" His mother shouted through the door she couldn't open from the outside. "Did you fall? Have you hit your head?" "I can't unlock the door!" He yelled. "Get me out of here!"

His father went and got a ladder and leaned it against the side of the house just beneath the bedroom window. He pried open the window, came inside, walked past little Larry, and unlocked the door. "Thanks, Dad," Larry said—and ran out to play.

Do we sometimes have a similar prayer life? Missing God in the daily moments but crying out when we need him to unlock the door? Is our quality time with God all about, "Get me out of here! If you love me, unlock the door!" And if Jesus pulls through, we run past him and go about our life.

As an adult, Crabb sees it a bit differently: God has climbed through the small window into my dark room. But he doesn't walk by me to turn the lock that I couldn't budge. Instead, he sits down on the bathroom floor and says, "Come sit with me!" He seems to think that climbing into the room to be with me matters more than letting me out to play.

Either we can keep asking God to give us what we think will make us happy—to escape our dark room, so we can run and be about our business—or we can accept his invitation to sit with him, for now, perhaps, in darkness, and to seize the opportunity to know him better and represent him well in this difficult world. That is what Advent offers.

Julian of Norwich (14th century) prayed to God for a deeper longing for God. She longed to long more for God. She called it a wound, "the wound of longing." By God's grace we may feel some opening of the "wound of longing" in this Advent season.

Advent speaks to us of the Christ, who shall come as the King of Kings, but it also speaks to us of the Christ who comes as a friend, to walk or sit with us in the pain and gladness of our daily lives, however hectic they may be.

When you think of it, every day we awake is an example of God's mercy. Each day we have another opportunity to love Christ in a deeper way. Hence, every day is our gratitude to God for this to happen.

With that said, I thought we might start off our Advent by taking up index cards in your pews and write what you are most grateful for to God as we begin Advent. What wonder have you noticed to give God thanks. Take a moment now, fill them out and the ushers will take them up with our collections.