

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT - A

We begin a new liturgical year with first Sunday in Advent and begin to read St Matthew's gospel. The first Sunday in Advent is about the Second coming of Christ: the second Sunday gives us the preaching of John the Baptist preparing the people to welcome Christ; on the third Sunday John reveals Jesus as the Messiah; on the fourth Sunday the gospel tells of Mary preparing for the birth of Jesus. In the gospel reading today we have Matthew telling us to stay awake and be prepared for Christ when he comes again. In the beautiful first reading we have Isaiah's vision of all peoples submitting to the rule of God and wishing to walk in his paths. The second reading from the letter to the Romans follows the same theme telling us to live lives in a manner that prepares us to be able to live in the daylight.

The **First Reading** comes from the prophet Isaiah, the first part of the book, chs.1-39. Isaiah was born about 765 BC and received his prophetic vocation while in the Temple in Jerusalem. His mission was to proclaim the fall of Israel and Judah as punishment for the nation's infidelity. He exercised his ministry for forty years and proclaimed his teaching in four distinct periods. It seems Isaiah finished his teaching by 700, after which date we know nothing of the prophet. There is a tradition that his life ended in martyrdom. His writings show Isaiah to be a poet of genius. The revelation of the transcendence of God and of human unworthiness he received in the Temple at the time of his call left a lasting mark on the prophet. For Isaiah God is an awesome God, a God who is Holy, Strong, the Mighty One, the King, we are his creatures defiled by sin for which God demands reparation insisting on just living among his people and sincerity in divine worship. Isaiah is the prophet of faith, he insists the people should trust in God in times of national crisis, by this alone will salvation be attained. Isaiah's hope is that a remnant of the people will recognise the Messiah for its King. This Messiah is to be a descendant of David. A prophet of considerable standing, Isaiah gathered round him a school of disciples who preserved his teaching.

This beautiful reading, 2.1-5, is part of Isaiah's vision. He has already spoken out against God's chosen people for their ingratitude and their hypocrisy, and then gives a lament for Jerusalem because she has lost her original fidelity and now practices heathen Canaanite customs. There follows the reading which confidently predicts that 'in the final days' there will be a change of heart people will return 'to the house of the God of Jacob' and these peoples will learn to walk in God's paths, peace will be restored and then comes the final line, 'House of Jacob (the Israelite people), come, let us walk in Yahweh's light' which is what all must learn to do in Advent.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 121.1-2,4-9, is one of the psalms pilgrims sang as they approached the holy city, they are impatient to be there and then we have the lines, 'At last our feet are standing at your gates, Jerusalem!' The second verse confirms the tribes making their way because the holy city is a visible sign of divine favours, the pledge of messianic promises hence 'a sign for Israel to give thanks to the name of Yahweh.' The last two verses are a prayer for peace, peace for Jerusalem, peace in your homes and peace in your hearts.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. Paul had not founded the Church in Rome but he intended to visit the Christians there on his way to Spain. This huge letter, with much detailed teaching, is difficult to summarize. The community in Rome was a mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish converts and there was a danger that they would look down on each other. Some of the converts from Judaism wanted pagan converts to be circumcised to ensure their salvation. Paul maintained this made nonsense of Christ's redemptive work. The Law was good and holy but made those who kept the Law aware of their need of God's help. This help has now been given in Christ Jesus which is explained in some detail.

The reading, 13.11-14, follows the theme of the Sunday by telling us to live lives so that we can 'arm ourselves and appear in the light.' Having spoken about the Christians' spiritual life in ch.8 and in chs.9-11 about the problem of Israel's part in the history of salvation following what has been learnt from statements in the OT Paul turns, in chs.12-15, to exhorting the Christian community in their new role as a result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, they now have replaced the temple in Jerusalem. In part of this section Paul speaks of their submission to civil authority, ch.13, because all authority comes from God and then how love fulfils the law, there follows the verses which make up our reading. Paul urges them in keeping the law of love 'because the time has come.....our salvation is nearer than when we first came to believe.' 'The night' that is our life here on earth is like living in the dark compared with the divine light into which we hope to be received. Paul urges the Roman Christians to 'live decently' and stop trying to pamper their natural disordered inclinations. Good advice for Advent to prepare for the first and second coming of Christ.