

Homily: Sunday, December 3, 2006**Jer 33:14-16/1 Thes 3:12—4:2/Lk 21:25-28, 34-36 (3) Pss I**

Today's readings on this first Sunday of Advent focus our attention on the future—a future that we anticipate in faith and approach in confidence if we have been steadfast and attentive.

In the first reading, the prophet Jeremiah shares with the people a message from God: "The days are coming when I will fulfill my promise" to send a Savior. Jeremiah emphasizes that the people have not been forgotten and he encourages them to be steadfast, to keep faith. The promised One will come from the lineage of David and, when he appears, all will be well. Through Jeremiah, God encourages the people to trust, to wait in hope, to believe.

In the second reading, Saint Paul delivers a similar message to the people of Thessolonia. Be steadfast; try even harder to "be blameless in holiness." Don't give up. Keep following the way that you have been taught. Keep your focus on the future, when Christ will return in glory.

And today's Gospel reading from Luke is all about the future—specifically the end time. It is apocalyptic in nature, describing natural phenomena, extreme fright, and perplexing signs until at last Christ returns "with great glory." Because we have no idea when that Second Coming will occur, we must be ready "at all times." The church sets aside the season of Advent each year so that we can turn our attention to that readiness.

In all of today's readings there is a common thread: if we have been vigilant and steadfast in our faith, we need not fear the future. If moment to moment we have been faithful in following Christ, we will be ready for whatever may come—trials, tribulations, natural disasters, death, even the end of the world.

Those are big "ifs"—IF we have been vigilant, and IF moment to moment we have been faithful. It's much easier to ignore God and the demands of the Gospel and go about our lives as though nothing will ever happen. But we can't go through life ignoring God and expect to be ready when trials arrive, and arrive they will. A cataclysmic event in our lives is no time to wish we had paid more attention to God, because what little we know and believe about God will be found

sorely lacking. We will only have the courage to "stand erect and raise our heads" at such times if our faith is on a solid foundation. The whole message of Advent is to be ready, to prepare, to be vigilant so as to recognize Christ in the midst of everyday life, including its most challenging moments.

Next Sunday is the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious, and religious communities are a profound example of how steadfast faith enables us to face life's trials and challenges. Over the past 18 years of this collection, we have heard of the plight of religious communities who served with minimal compensation for years so that the church, Catholic education, and Catholic health care institutions could be established and could flourish throughout this country. We have all benefited from that legacy, directly or indirectly.

These women and men religious were steadfast and faithful, striving to follow Christ moment-to-moment. Certainly they can "stand erect and raise their heads" in readiness to greet the Lord when He comes.

But they have paid a significant price. As their numbers declined and members grew in age and infirmity, their resources dwindled. In 1988, the collection was established that will be taken up next week, a collection that has been a godsend to the many religious communities that benefit directly from its proceeds.

When we talk about fidelity and steadfast love and facing the future with uncompromising faith, we have no better examples to follow than men and women religious. They are Advent people, waiting in joyful hope for the coming of Christ into their everyday lives. Each of us is also called to "abound in love," as Saint Paul says in today's second reading, to manifest Christ in our world. A generous response to next week's collection is one way for us to "do what is right and just." On behalf of all the religious who will benefit from your generosity, thank you and God bless you.

Homily: Sunday, December 10, 2006**Bar 5:1-9/Phil 1:4-6, 8-11/Lk 3:1-6 (6) Pss II**

On this second Sunday of Advent, our readings are positive and upbeat, encouraging us to trust God's providence and faithfulness. The first reading from Baruch and the second reading from Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians are very similar. In each, the people are reminded that God is on their side, leading them, guiding them, making sure that all the many blessings God has bestowed on them will come to fulfillment and fruition. Even when we lose sight of the path, God is aware of our progress on the journey and he goes before us leveling mountains and filling valleys so that we can "advance secure." What a comforting image that is.

In the Gospel reading from Luke, we are asked by John the Baptist to return the favor, to clear the way for the Lord to come into our world, to make straight his paths. Christ accompanies and sustains us as we prepare his way in our world. There's a beautiful synergy in the mutuality of that relationship.

Oftentimes we may think that our relationship with God is one-sided—either God should be taking all of the initiative to make sure our lives are safe, secure, and comfortable, or we feel the quality and depth of our relationship with God all depends on us. Neither exaggeration is true. Yes, God watches over and loves us, and has provided all we need to gain eternal life. But we must accept and respond to that love. And yes, as in any relationship, we have responsibilities toward God to do our part to nurture and sustain our love; but God is guiding us every step of the way.

Today's readings are so appropriate as we mark the 19th year of the Retirement Fund for Religious appeal, today's second collection in parishes all across the country. Religious communities are a living enactment of the mutual relationship described in today's readings—God attending to them on their journey, clearing countless obstacles in their paths as they, in turn, prepare the way for God to enter and be recognized in our world.

A major mountain looming in the path of many religious communities is financial impoverishment. Having labored to prepare the way of the Lord and make straight his paths in this country, religious are now encountering some "winding roads" and "rough ways" that they cannot navigate alone. We must help

them by doing our part in the mutual relationship of today's readings, by cooperating with God in making low the mountains of projected debt and filling in the valleys of financial need that so many religious are facing.

It is also an opportunity to do our part to return the generosity that men and women religious showered upon us and upon the church. There is mutuality in that relationship as well, and today's collection is a means by which we can return the favor of their selfless service.

Saint Paul entreats us in today's second reading to "discern what is of value." We are bombarded every day in this consumer society by messages that link "value" with the latest trends in gadgets, cars, and clothes. But what is really of value? What really matters? Where should we invest our energy and resources? The Scriptures tell us—in doing good, in helping others, in works of charity that chip away at the mountains of poverty and prejudice in our world, that fill hungry hearts and minds and stomachs, that make rough ways smooth for others. Today's annual collection is one such opportunity to make rough ways smooth.

So I humbly ask you as we take up the collection for women and men religious to discern what is of value today. Let's not miss this opportunity to participate in a mutual relationship with our God that will better our lives and the lives of others while making the love of God more manifest in our world.