

Today we begin another year as Catholics, another year in our journey toward heaven. Today we enter once again into the holy season of Advent when we look forward with hope and anticipation to the coming of the Lord.

This coming of the Lord was foretold for centuries by the prophets of the Old Testament. Time and time again the Lord sent messages of hope that He had not abandoned His people, messages that called God's people to look forward with expectation that He would come to save them. We hear one of these messages today in the Prophet Jeremiah.

600 years before Christ, Jeremiah was speaking to the people of Jerusalem, as they were being besieged by the Babylonian armies. In the midst of their inevitable defeat, Jeremiah brought God's promise of a Savior. "I will raise up for David a just shoot."

David, of course, was the great king, whose dynasty had been broken for many generations. But just as Isaiah had prophesied a century earlier that a shoot would sprout from the stump of Jesse, David's father, so now Jeremiah was promising a just shoot. From that old line of David would come a new King who would bring justice and security to Jerusalem and Judah. God fulfilled these promises in the Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Throughout this season of Advent, we will be preparing our hearts and our souls for this celebration at Christmas. But the coming of Christ at Christmas is not the only coming for which we must be prepared. This season of Advent is also a time for us to be reminded of the second coming of Christ.

Every week in the Creed we profess our faith that Jesus “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.” It is this second coming that Jesus speaks of in the Gospel.

This second coming of the Lord will be much different than the Lord’s first coming at Christmas. When Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph in the cave in Bethlehem, His coming went unnoticed. Apart from the shepherds and the three wise men, no one paid much attention. The tiny king of the universe came to us quietly, born in a stable, hidden by his poverty and simplicity.

But the second coming of Christ certainly will not go unnoticed. When the Lord returns, He will come in a cloud with power and great glory. Everyone will know that Christ is here; everyone will know that Christ is the King. The question for us is: will we be prepared? Jesus Himself says that, when these things happen, some will be struck with fear. What could cause such fear in people as the Lord returns? Perhaps fear comes when people do not know the Lord. When the great and powerful king arrives who is a stranger, or worse an enemy, the natural response would be fear.

But that should not be our response. As followers of the Lord, we should recognize Jesus when He returns. This is why Jesus calls us to stand upright and to raise our heads in hope. He calls us to be people of hope who can rejoice when He comes again in glory. And we will rejoice, if we recognize the king who is returning with power and glory.

This is why Holy Mother Church gives us this season of Advent each year, to prepare our hearts, to prepare our souls for the day when we will meet the Lord. Advent reminds us that we must not be strangers to the Lord and that we certainly must not be enemies of the Lord. And so Advent becomes the time for preparation. If we have begun to prepare our homes for Christmas, decorating and buying gifts and planning for our celebrations, how much more must we prepare our hearts and our souls?

Jesus tells us what it means to prepare our hearts and souls. He cautions us against losing sight of Him through sin - carousing, drunkenness, and useless anxiety. He calls us to be vigilant, to keep our eyes open and alert. He calls us to pray. These are the ways that we will grow closer in our relationship with the Lord - by avoiding sin, by drawing near to Him daily in prayer, by watching with hope for the times that He shows us His presence and His mercy and His love.

There are many ways that we can prepare ourselves to recognize Christ when He returns. First, we can increase our time of daily prayer. A few more minutes of silence, listening for God's voice, or adding a rosary to our daily prayer during Advent, or taking advantage of opportunities here in church such as Advent evening prayer or adoration on Tuesday evenings or daily Mass. And we can receive the Lord's healing mercy in Reconciliation. If you've been away from that sacrament for a while, let Advent be the time to come back to confession and receive the Lord's mercy and healing.

Finally, Advent is a perfect time to examine our own actions. Not only must we be ready to recognize the Lord when He returns, but we must be sure that He will recognize us. Do we live, by our actions, as His disciples? St. Paul prays that the Thessalonians will “abound in love for one another and for all.” This is how a disciple of Christ must live - abounding in love for one another and for all. Advent is the time for us to forgive someone whom we have refused to forgive. Advent is the time to make sure we are caring for those who are in need - the poor, the sick, the homeless, the imprisoned. Advent is the time to make sure that we love one another as disciples of Christ, so that the Lord will recognize us when He returns.

This holy season of Advent is a blessed time of hope and preparation and renewal. It is a time for us to put into action more and more those things that are required of us if we wish to become saints. Let us ask the Lord for the grace to see where He is calling us to grow in our love for Him and our love for our neighbor. And may He give us the strength to prepare our hearts and souls for His coming so that we may be filled with hope and joy at His return.