

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT (11/28-29/2009)

Jeremiah 33/14-16, Psalm 25, 1 Thessalonians 3/12-4/2, Luke 21/25-36

This Sunday, as you know, marks the beginning of the new liturgical year.

Throughout this year, what we call the “C” cycle, we shall be hearing readings from the Gospel according to *Luke* on most Sundays.

Luke is a consummate story teller and some of Jesus’ lengthier and more vivid parables have been preserved by him as e. g., the *Good Samaritan*, the *Prodigal Son*.

Luke also depicts Jesus as having a great concern for the poor, a fact that shows up often in the Gospel account.

Finally, *Luke* presents Jesus as a man of prayer, and of great compassion and forgiveness.

All in all, we look forward to spending this liturgical year with *Luke* and with his unique Gospel account of the life and ministry of Jesus.

But there is nothing of the sympathetic, compassionate Jesus in today’s reading.

Not that he is cruel or insensitive, but he is stern in his warning to us to be ready for the second coming of the Lord.

“People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

And *“Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life...for that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth.”*

I mean, those are not particularly reassuring words, promising us that everything will turn out just peachy.

Jesus is putting us on notice that we have responsibility for our actions in this life.

And one day, those actions will undergo the scrutiny of the Lord Himself.

This fear of the Lord is not meant to immobilize us, but to guide us as we move forward.

At times, I wonder whether the image of ultimate judgment actually motivates people.

Years ago, the fear of hell was a powerful element of our Catholic belief system.

It probably accounted for the fact that our churches were invariably filled on Sunday, and that the majority of Catholics went to Mass on a far more regular basis.

At the time of the Second Vatican Council, emphasis on hellfire and damnation as a motivation for our virtuous acts diminished greatly; the consequences were immediately apparent.

Church attendance has been falling steadily ever since; and far fewer people take advantage of the sacrament of Reconciliation than ever did years ago.

Not too many of us want to go back to the “give ‘em hell!” attitude in the church.

That simply will not work; so we have to find our motivation for good works elsewhere, like in our simple belief in Jesus who helps us see how the Kingdom can come alive in our lives.

And that we deliberately seek first the Kingdom and allow our actions to flow from that gift.

And that we take seriously Jesus’ injunction to love our neighbor, to love even our enemy, to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile.

And, above all, that we place our trust in him and in his Word.

If all of that is in place, maybe we won’t have to worry about Mass attendance on weekends.