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A homily for the 1st Sunday of Advent

Date: Sunday, November 27, 2016 | **Season:** Advent | **Year:** A

First Reading: Isaiah 2:1–5

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 122:1–9 | **Response:** We shall go rejoicing to the house of the Lord.

Second Reading: Romans 13:11–14

Gospel Acclamation: Psalm 85:8

Gospel Reading: Matthew 24:37–44

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Today is the First Sunday of Advent. It is the first day of the Church's year and during this time the Church, in her liturgy, offers us images about the coming of the Lord. In the first part of Advent, the images are mostly about the second and glorious coming of the Lord on the last day, and they teach us the necessity of preparing ourselves now for that great day – to be awake and alert for that time. In the final part of Advent, we meditate on the incarnation of God on earth in his birth in Bethlehem which we remember every Christmas. As we heard from the Jesuit Institute last week – and I promised to plug their book today too – we are preparing ourselves to go on a Journey for Jesus' birthday.

In today's readings, Advent is described as a journey from two directions. From one side, in the vision of Isaiah in the first reading, we see the nations going to Jerusalem, to the mountain of the Lord's house. From the other direction, in the gospel, we envision the coming of the Son of Man and how ready we must be. Both journeys, the going and the coming, look to a future realization on "that day and hour no one knows". But this future is not far away and so we have to be

alert, we have to be awake – because we are all called to be part of God Kingdom here and now – in our own Church and in our own lives. Perhaps we need to change something in our lives – to convert – in order to more easily recognize Jesus who is with us on our journey? As part of that journey and conversion we might ask ourselves what are the things in my own life that I need to stop doing, in order to encounter Jesus more?

We know that our whole life is a journey: we must go on this journey to arrive at the mountain of the Lord, to encounter Jesus. The most important thing that can happen to a person is to meet Jesus: this encounter with Jesus who loves us, who has saved us, who has given his life for us. But to meet Him, we must continue the journey. And we are always journeying.

We could ask ourselves this question: When do I meet Jesus? Is it only at the end? No – a journey is not a race. We meet Jesus every day. How? I would say we meet Jesus in prayer, when you pray, you meet Jesus and more importantly, you allow Jesus to meet you. When you bring your child to be baptized, you meet Jesus, you find Jesus again. When you receive Communion, you meet Jesus in the Sacraments.

And today, you who are making your first Communion, you too will encounter Jesus in a very special way today; In fact that's why I think the Church has Advent at the beginning of the year, to show that we can meet Jesus right away – even if Jesus is only a baby born in a stable – our journey with Jesus is one that precisely as we grow older is also a journey with Jesus as He grows older. We accompany him and he accompanies us – that is what encounter is about. Our whole life is an encounter with Jesus: in prayer, when we go to Mass, and when we do good works, when we visit the sick, when we help the poor, when we think of others, when we are not selfish, when we are loving, when we forgive those who have hurt us ... in these things we always meet Jesus. And the journey of life is precisely this: journeying in order to meet Jesus.

But a journey in which we do not encounter Jesus is not a Christian journey. What makes our life journey Christian is that we continually strive to encounter Jesus, to watch him, to let ourselves be watched over by Jesus, because Jesus

watches us with love – his second coming is not something we should fear – but like the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son – it will be a coming together of someone who has spent his life searching for us; he loves us so much and he is always watching over us. To encounter Jesus also means allowing oneself to be gazed upon by him – so we cannot journey to Jesus if we want to hide.

“But, Father, you know,” one of you might say to me, “you know that this journey is horrible for me, I am such a sinner, I have committed many sins ... how can I encounter Jesus?”. But we know from the Bible that the people whom Jesus most sought out were the greatest sinners. He was with sinners.... And he said: I came for those in need of salvation, in need of healing. This is because Jesus heals our sins. And along the way Jesus comes and forgives us – all of us sinners, we are all sinners – even when we make a mistake, when we sin. And this forgiveness that we receive in Confession is an encounter with Jesus. We always encounter Jesus. And we must be alert because Jesus is always encountering us. Just think, the best encounters are ones where we share experiences. Let us not forget that the holy Trinity so desired to encounter each and every one of us that the Word became Flesh and lived among us so that he could share our humanity, and through the Sacrament he instituted, He encounters each of us in a very personal way when we receive him in Communion.

And today we in this Church are in a special way a witness to 12 wonderful young people who are making their first holy communion – and in a special way encountering Jesus by receiving his Body and Blood. I want to speak to you all now.

The communion that you will receive is like medicine for the journey. That’s why we come every week to receive it – to give us strength to continue on the journey. We all know that when we are hungry we become irritable and not fun to be around – right? No one likes to be hungry. Well – when we are physically hungry we can always eat something, right? But we are also spiritually hungry – and that’s when we need the Eucharist – to sustain us, one week, one day at a time. In Advent we are told to be alert to Jesus’ presence and his coming into the world. His coming is not just in the future – it is right now in our own lives. And

coming to Mass and receiving communion is a privilege. That's why you had to study so hard and learn about Jesus – so that you can recognize Him. Your teachers tell me you have done very well – and I hope and pray that today you will always remember the first time you received communion.

After the sign of peace today I shall ask you all to line up here on this bottom step and we will – as a Church – pray for you as you take Communion for the first time, but not the last time, right – you promise!? No – because the journey is long and you will need to prepare yourselves.

So let us go forward in life like this, as the Prophet says, to the mountain, until the day when we shall attain the final encounter, when we will be able to look upon the beautiful gaze of Jesus, which is so beautiful. This is the Christian life: to walk, to go forward, united as brothers and sisters, loving one another, encountering Jesus – journeying together.

Let us pray that we might never give up on our journey. Let us pray for courage and perseverance, and let us pray that we might never allow ourselves to fall so much asleep that we know longer recognize Jesus in our lives. Let us pray to always be awake and alert to God's presence in our lives.

Source: <https://sj.mcharlesworth.fr/homilies/2016-11nov-27-ya-at-01/>

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