



READERS' NOTES FOR THE SUNDAYS OF ADVENT YEAR A

ADVENT

First Sunday of Advent

Stay awake, so that you may be ready!

The Word this Week

Advent opens with a great promise: In the days to come the hope of a people who need God. ...The master is coming is also a promise, not a threat to breed fear, but to answer our cry. So Advent begins, not with thoughts of the past, with the coming of the Lord we celebrate at Christmas, but with the future, and the promise that He is coming back. We are encouraged to stay awake, and treat every day as the day the Lord will come; we do not do this out of fear for a Master who beats his servants, but out of love of a Master who always treats us with mercy. Nevertheless we must always be watchful, because we can grow sleepy and complacent, saying that we can leave this prayer or that confession or the other change in the way we live to tomorrow. Even as we look forward to the tomorrow of the Lord's coming, we must remember that it might be today!

First Reading

Isaiah 2:1-5

Isaiah is the prophet of Advent so much of his ministry was to alert the people of Israel to the coming of the Promised Messiah, and to describe for them the world after the Messiah's coming. Even though we are about to celebrate the feast of the birth of the Messiah at Christmas, we are still a people in waiting. This is why the prophecies of Isaiah that accompany us through Advent are not historical curiosities, but real promises for our future. In preparing this reading, think about what God promises through Isaiah: is this good news for your congregation? Is the vision of the Mountain of the Temple of the Lord worth proclaiming? Read this passage as a piece of joyful poetry: try to engage the listeners in the promise look for phrases like All the nations will stream, he will adjudicate between many peoples or nation will not lift sword against nation. Think about the situation of the world in which we live as you proclaim these words.

Second Reading

Romans 13:11-14

If Isaiah offers the vision, Paul offers the practical advice: this short reading uses the winter imagery of dark and light to invite the Church to stand ready. In the first words of the reading, make sure you know what the time refers to: it is the day the Master returns - the end of the world. For Paul, we are already living in the time of Jesus' coming, which is why we dare not put things off any further. Avoid a hectoring or lecturing tone in this reading: it is more like the whispered urging of a friend, encouraging us with a hopeful promise. Yes, there are things that we must put right, but only because it is worth it! Be careful with some of the words (promiscuity and licentiousness), and make sure you do not lose the last sentence: pause before it, and proclaim with confidence: Let your armour be the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second Sunday of Advent

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand

The Word this Week

Throughout the first three weeks of Advent our focus is very clearly on the End of Time, and the Second Coming of the Lord - not on the run up to Christmas (that only comes in the last week). If we view Advent as a Season preparing for Christmas these readings will make little sense - and neither will the figure of John the Baptist who appears today: if it was about the preparation for Christmas, then John the Baptist, preaching after Jesus was born, becomes a confusing figure: his role is to preach to us, as he did of old, and to prepare us for the (second) coming of the Lord. Everything gets more specific today: what is being preached is not an event, but a person: Isaiah promises him, John welcomes him, Paul invites us to imitate him. We have here a thumbnail portrait of the Messiah useful to refer to when we get to Christmas and he is revealed as a child in a manger!

First Reading

Isaiah 11:1-10

Isaiah utters this great prophecy describing the Promised Messiah: what will he do when he comes? This beautiful reading contains some of the most memorable and powerful Advent imagery; the reader should do her best to enjoy this imagery, and to allow all the ideas and pictures to engage the attention and (more importantly) the imagination of the listeners. Reading too quickly will kill this reading: you must take your time! Without reading too slowly that it becomes painful for the congregation, give them plenty of time to hear, listen and think. Especially look for the pauses between themes there is a big change of mood when you move into the part starting *The wolf lives with the lamb*. The beginning of the reading can be problematic: *shoot and scion* are unusual words to apply to a person, and despite the familiarity of this reading, it can take a while for people to tune in this is one of those occasions where a brief and well thought out introduction to the First Reading can be useful (either given by the

President, the Reader or a Commentator). Use the sense lines the reading is printed in to gauge your pace.

Second Reading

Romans 15:4-9

This reading is about patience and hope. Christ is coming again, keep going! When you begin, aim for the word hope on line two. This reading is a link into the Mission of John the Baptist, who had to preach to a people who had been waiting for hundreds of years! He was telling them that Christ was coming, so that God could fulfil his promises to the Patriarchs. We've already been waiting nigh on 2,000 years for Christ's Second Coming, so Paul's words are suitable for us, too! As long as you have read this out loud beforehand, it should not present too many problems. You still have to insert some mental commas to make sure that the phrases come out correctly (so, for example, you should insert a slight pause after something about hope, on line two) Practise the intonation of not only to it was also in the second paragraph: these phrases must balance each other: try different readings out loud until you find one that works.



Third Sunday of Advent

Are you the one who is to come, or have we got to wait for someone else?

The Word this Week

In many ways the readings this Sunday are simply a continuation of last week. Isaiah gives us more details about the work of the Messiah, and Paul invites us to continue to be patient until the Lord's Coming. What is slightly different is the voice of John the Baptist this week: last week in Matthew 3 he was proclaiming with utter confidence that someone is coming. Now, in Matthew 11, he asks Jesus from prison: Is it you? For us, as we listen to these scriptures, we are being offered something very particular: the prophecies of Isaiah (and indeed the prophet John the Baptist) are pinned down firmly and securely in the person of Jesus, Son of Mary. In fact, Jesus himself, in his reply to John, says as much: I am the Messiah that Isaiah prophesied. Again we are invited to hold the images of the prophecies in our minds until Christmas, when we can look on the child in the manger and say, We know who this is: it is the promised Messiah. God who comes to save us!

First Reading *Isaiah 35:1-6,10*

This famous passage is the one Jesus applies to himself in the synagogue at Nazareth: in it we hear who the Messiah is, and what he brings. This Sunday is called 'Gaudete' Sunday - 'Rejoice' - because we are glad to hear about the One who is coming, and we rejoice that he comes. Your tone throughout should be glad and enthusiastic at the good things the Messiah brings, the second half, especially, should conjure up the picture of the glory and beauty of the One who Comes. When a reading is written out in sense-lines (as this one is) it is poetry; this demands a style of reading which is more reflective, more aware of the images presented. Similarly, when a reading has distinct paragraphs (as here), you should use the pauses that such spacing suggests. So, here, the final paragraph (For as the earth...) is a new image and you should pause before announcing it, so that the minds of your listeners have a moment to adjust to a new idea. Whenever there is an analogy (...as a garden...so...)

make sure that each half is clear and distinct. Think in terms of the pictures, and the reading will be easier to read and understand.

Second Reading

James 5:7-10

Having heard from Paul so far in Advent, we now hear what Saint James has to say. If we are so taken up in the vision of Isaiah that we have just heard, we may find ourselves joining in the prayers of Advent: Come quickly, Lord! Do not delay! This is why we need to hear the encouragement of James, who says that in addition to longing and expectation, we need patience. We cannot understand God's timetable - how many times in our lives have we wished we could! Normally Saint James is rather fiery and abrupt. He is being much more gentle and persuasive in this passage. Read with a degree of gentleness and, indeed, patience! Remember this is still not so much about Christmas as about the end of time the you of this reading is still the congregation as we gather.



Fourth Sunday of Advent

Jesus is born of Mary who was betrothed to Joseph, son of David

The Word this Week

Here we enter a new stage of Advent: having spent so much time on the Second Coming, now we look back, to remember the details of the Lord's First Coming. Today we focus on the characters of Mary and Joseph, and hear of the circumstances surrounding the conception of the child Jesus, and the reaction of Joseph. This mystery springs from the House of David, and so we lead into the Gospel by hearing of the promise that the Messiah would come from that line. The link between the First Reading and the Gospel is quite explicit today, since Matthew actually quotes Isaiah. Joseph, descendant of King David, is invited to take his place in the great story of God's relationship with the Chosen people. There is great sense of a timeless mystery reaching its focal point, as that which was promised long ago (Second Reading) now takes flesh in the womb of Mary.

First Reading

Isaiah 7:10-14

Sometimes there is a comforting familiarity about the Word of God – a sort of “Oh yes, I know what this one’s all about feeling!” Today is an ideal example: we know that Christmas is only a breath away, and we hear the prophecy of Isaiah to Ahaz, and immediately fill in the gaps and interpret the prophecy correctly. While this takes some of the pressure off the reader, you still have to deliver the message clearly! Ahaz is not a nice character (he was reputed to have sacrificed his son in a pagan ritual, and dismantled the Temple of the Lord in favour of worship of a foreign god in Damascus) When he says, I will not put the Lord to the test, it’s not a virtuous statement (which is how it can sound to us): basically he’s saying he doesn’t need God for anything, which is why Isaiah is angry with him. Once you’ve got over this awkward paragraph the rest should be plain sailing.

Second Reading: *Romans 1:1-7*

Why do we read this today? (This is always a good question to ask about a reading, especially in the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent or Easter). Paul begins his letter to the Christians in Rome with the core of his message that is at the centre of all that he is going to say: This news is about the Son of God. Saint Paul never describes the Nativity, but in this short passage we have his understanding of the significance of the birth of Jesus to Mary he is the Good News that God promised long ago through his prophets in the scriptures. (See the First Reading!) Those who are listening to this reading in Church may lack these insights, and so you have to emphasise the right phrases to help them follow what Saint Paul is saying, and what it has to do with the Fourth Sunday of Advent. In the first lines, aim for promised long ago and make sure that you are thinking about the First Reading when you say this. The second paragraph is a lot harder – it moves from the birth of Jesus (according to the human nature he took) all the way through the Resurrection to the preaching that Paul is engaged in taking the Good News of long ago to new peoples and nations (such as the pagans in Rome).

