

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

BEGIN

Be silent. Be still. Pray, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

PRAY

While you wrought awesome deeds we could not
hope for, such as they had not heard of from of old.
No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen,
any God but you
doing such deeds for those who wait for him.

~Isaiah 64:2-4

LISTEN

Read Mark 13:33-37.

Jesus said to his disciples: "Be watchful! Be alert!"

~Mark 13:33

Let Us Awaken

Baseball has added many expressions to our everyday language, including the term "benchwarmer," which was used in baseball journalism at least as early as 1890.

That term refers to a team member who does not play regularly. "Benchwarmer" can suggest a player who is inferior to the regulars and, consequently, of little value to the team, but in many cases, the opposite is true. The benchwarmer may be a player of great value in strategic situations. For example, a batter who has a knack for bunting in order to drive in a runner home from third base.

The most sought-after benchwarmer—known more formally as a “reserve player”—is one who is always in the game, even when he’s sitting on the bench. He is always alert and attentive to the situation on the field so that, if he is called into the game, he is ready. He is not the player lounging against the wall; he is the player on the edge of his seat. That’s what Jesus is urging for his disciples in today’s gospel passage.

Some commentators use this passage to warn us to be ready for the final judgment at the end of time, but we needn’t focus on only that as Advent begins. We can also take Jesus’ remarks as an invitation to awaken our spiritual consciousness, to become aware, all day every day, of God’s love for us—a love so great that he was willing to join his divine nature and our human nature in the birth of our Savior.

Christmas is only three weeks away. Wake up now to the wonder of the incarnation, and never be distracted from it as the holy day draws near.

ACT

I will try to avoid unnecessary busyness during this season and, instead, open myself each day to quiet anticipation of the Lord’s coming.

PRAY

Lord Jesus Christ, may I never lose a sense of wonder and gratitude for the great gift of your incarnation. May my anticipation of your coming absorb me throughout this holy season. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 4

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

BEGIN

Be silent. Be still. Pray, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

PRAY

They shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
One nation shall not raise the sword against another,
nor shall they train for war again.

~Isaiah 2:4

LISTEN

Read Matthew 8:5–11.

The centurion said in reply, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed."

~Matthew 8:8

Brothers, Sisters All

The television series *Downton Abbey* presented a picture of life in a British manor house in the early twentieth century. The titled residents treated their servants with respect and kindness and often even intervened to make a servant's life better. But historians tell us that the situation was usually quite different from this.

Servants commonly lived and worked in harsh conditions and were kept away from the family as much as possible. There were usually separate staircases to minimize encounters between the householders and those "below stairs," and a servant who did happen to cross

paths with one of the lords or ladies was to turn and face the wall until the grand personage had passed by.

This sort of thing was to be expected in a society with sharp class distinctions, and the absence of such a mentality is an interesting aspect to today's gospel passage. Jesus remarks that he has never found in Israel the level of faith exhibited by the centurion who begged Jesus to heal an ailing servant.

No doubt, Jesus is referring in part to the fact that the centurion, a Gentile and an agent of the Roman occupation, would approach him at all, and the fact that the centurion believed that Jesus could heal the servant just by willing it.

But Jesus must have been moved too by the soldier's concern for a "serving boy" who would have been beneath the notice of most Roman officers but whose life was as dear as any other in the eyes of God. The implication is that the centurion had already embraced the kind of compassion Jesus preached and practiced—a compassion without distinction that all Christian disciples are called to imitate.

ACT

I will resist any inclination to regard the life or well-being of another as less precious than my own.

PRAY

Almighty God, may I be inspired by the centurion's encounter with Jesus to attend to the well-being of those I encounter this day. May I respect each person and respond to him or her in love. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

BEGIN

Be silent. Be still. Pray, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

PRAY

The calf and the young lion shall browse together,
with a little child to guide them.

~Isaiah 11:6

LISTEN

Read Luke 10:21–24.

I give you praise, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,
for although you have hidden these things from the
wise and the learned you have revealed them to the
childlike.

~Luke 10:21

Mouths of Babes

I was vesting for a First Communion Mass when one of the altar servers, a boy, told me that I had given him a box of crayons at his First Communion Mass a year before. I had used the box of crayons, which had lain unopened in my dresser drawer for fifteen years, as a prop in my homily to the children.

"You said," the boy reminded me, "that if you have something with some value but never use it for what it was made for, it is worthless."

"I was at that Mass," said another server, a girl. "You said it was like your heart: if you keep it inside you, it has no value. You have to give it away."

"Yeah," said the boy, "and that's what Jesus did."

I was dazzled by these two kids, and only later did it occur to me what an apt metaphor that conversation was for the point Jesus made at the beginning of today's gospel passage. The idea that those children had absorbed is both profound and simple, and its beauty is in its simplicity.

Scholars in theology, philosophy, and scripture make essential contributions, but applying our faith to everyday life and imparting it to others in our role as missionary disciples requires a grasp of the core of Jesus' message—the greatest commandments: Love God and love each other—without conditions or exceptions.

The learned and the clever often see conditions and exceptions; the merest children, regardless of their age, do not.

ACT

Jesus said the whole law is summed up in the “greatest commandments” (Matthew 22:36–40). Each evening this week, I will reflect on how well I lived those commandments throughout my day.

PRAY

Come Holy Spirit, clear my mind of distractions, and prepare me to see clearly how the commandments of love can transform my life and the lives of everyone I encounter. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

BEGIN

Be silent. Be still. Pray, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

PRAY

You spread the table before me
in the sight of my foes;
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

~Psalm 23:5

LISTEN

Read Matthew 15:29–37.

He took the seven loaves and the fish, gave thanks, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds. They all ate and were satisfied.

~Matthew 15:36–37

How Many Loaves?

My family and I were driving across a desert in the West many years ago, staring out at the stark, brown landscape, broken only by sagebrush, tumbleweed, and the occasional prairie dog. After regarding this scene in silence for a while, my father-in-law remarked, "If this were Israel, there would be corn growing here." I knew what he meant; I had seen firsthand the outcomes of agricultural programs in Israel. I also think of his comment whenever I read the story in today's gospel passage about Jesus feeding the multitude.

In this episode and in others like it that are described in the gospels, Jesus wasn't showing off his power over nature; he was teaching us that we can provide food for the hungry if we really want to—a constant theme in the ministry of Pope Francis. Hunger-related problems are not caused by lack of ample food supply but by our failing to justly distribute what we produce, limit waste, curtail excess consumption, protect the environment, reexamine priorities in production and distribution, and understand adequate nourishment as a human right, not as a privilege of the few.

Those are big challenges that require big changes in business practices and public policy, but as citizens we are not altogether powerless to influence decision makers. We must as a global community be willing to make changes. There are plenty of hungry people in our spheres of influence, and there are plenty of ways for us to do as Jesus did by making the most of what we have at hand—using only what we need and sharing all we can.

ACT

I will research the degree to which hunger is a problem in my community, county, or state and then commit myself to do one concrete thing to help curtail or eliminate it.

PRAY

Creator God, you did not entrust the earth's resources to human beings so that each of us could take advantage of them only for our own benefit. As a disciple of Jesus—who fed the hungry when others failed—may I share all I can with those who are in need. Amen.