

ADVENT

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar . . . , the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness; and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." ~ Luke 3:1-6

THE SEASON OF ADVENT stands at the very beginning of the liturgical year. It is about four weeks long and its purpose is to prepare the Church for the Lord's Second Coming. Speaking about the coming of the Son of Man, the Lord told his disciples to "take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come" (Mk 13:33). The Church, following the Lord's command sets aside

these weeks to call to mind the Lord's promised return and to exhort us to repent and turn our lives back to him. In the Gospel readings for Advent, we hear St. John the Baptist preaching repentance and calling the People of Israel to reform their lives. His words call us to change our lives and be ready for Christ's return. Jesus himself emphasizes this: "Let

your loins be girded and your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast, so that they may open to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes . . . You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour" (Lk 12:35-37, 40).

Also, we look forward to his coming with great hope because he will bring with him the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven. Advent is a time of genuine

conversion and reform of life. The purple vestments worn by the priest during Advent recall the importance of penance and change of heart. Acts of penance and fasting are encouraged during this season. There is a special focus in the liturgy on St. John the Baptist. Just as he prepared the Jews for the coming of Jesus' public teaching by calling them to repentance, so the Baptist calls out to us in the liturgy

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during the season of Advent: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Mt 3:2). In the Advent liturgy, we experience deep spiritual hunger and the need for the grace of salvation. It is a season of preparation so that we will recognize and embrace the Lord when he finally comes again.

Toward the end of Advent, the theme shifts to prepare us for

the Christmas season. From December 17 to Christmas Eve, the Church remembers God's deep love for the human race, uniquely and powerfully made manifest in the Incarnation when Christ came into the world as an infant. Through the sacred liturgy, we transcend time and experience the longing of Israel for God's promised Messiah (see Gn 3:15). The coming of the Messiah had been prophesied, anticipated, and expected throughout the ages by the Jewish people. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "Behold,

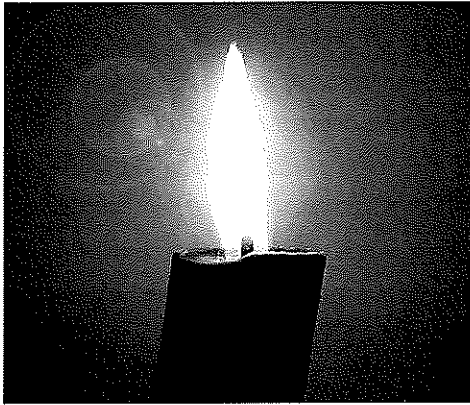
"The liturgy wonderfully prepares our hearts for his coming."

a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Is 7:14) (see "The Five Doctrines on Mary" regarding the use of "virgin" for "young woman" in the Greek translation of the Hebrew). Isaiah also predicted the coming Messiah when he said: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace'" (Is 9:2, 6).

In this beautiful season, we share in the hope of the Jewish people, from the greatest of the prophets to Mary of Nazareth, as they awaited the fulfillment of God's promise to send a savior. These last days of Advent, then, reflect the thousands of years of waiting for the Messiah.

Through the Scripture readings in the liturgy, we look forward to the birth of Jesus, who brings the light of love into the darkness of our existence. Also in Evening Prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours, we hear the traditional "O antiphons." These seven short prayers, which date back to the 6th century, are beautiful expressions of the Old Testament hope for Christ. The Gospel readings at Mass focus on the joyful events that lead up to the birth of our Savior in Bethlehem. We hear again of Mary's miraculous encounter with the angel Gabriel, of the loving trust of her husband Joseph, of Mary's joy-filled visit to her cousin Elizabeth, and of the birth of John the Baptist, the greatest of the prophets and the forerunner of the Messiah. Each of these events is of profound importance. Each event prepared the way for the birth of Jesus in our world more than two thousand years ago. Hearing them at the liturgy wonderfully prepares our hearts for his coming as well.

The whole season of Advent is a period of joyful expectation that helps us to prepare for the coming of Christ. It is a time both to reflect upon the importance of the coming of the infant Messiah and to prepare ourselves for his Second Coming as the mighty king. In the Incarnation, the second person of the Blessed Trinity assumed the helpless human condi-



tion of infancy to show us God's love. In his Second Coming, he will return to gather those who have been eagerly awaiting his return. In a special way during Advent, we turn to Heaven in eager anticipation, and call out to him, "Maranatha — Come, Lord Jesus, come!" (see Rv 22:20).

The "O" Antiphons of the Advent Season

An "O" antiphon is a short passage that is sung or recited before the Magnificat during Evening Prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours. The seven antiphons, which appear in the liturgy in the days immediately preceding Christmas, are called the "O" antiphons because each one, in its original wording, begins with an impassioned "O..." and then proceeds to call out to the hoped-for Messiah. The seven verses of the familiar Advent hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" are based on these antiphons.

December 17
O Wisdom of our God Most High,
guiding creation with power and love:
teach us to walk in the paths of knowledge!

December 18
O Leader of ancient Israel,
giver of the Law to Moses on Sinai:
rescue us with your mighty power!

December 19
O Flower of Jesse's stem,
sign of God's love for all his people:
save us without delay!

December 20
O Key of David,
opening the gates of God's eternal Kingdom:
free the prisoners of darkness!

December 21
O Radiant Dawn,
splendor of eternal light, sun of justice:
shine on those lost in the darkness of death!

December 22
O King of all nations,
source of your Church's unity and faith:
save all mankind, your own creation!

December 23
O Emmanuel,
God's presence among us, our King, our Judge:
save us, Lord our God!
(CCC 523-524)