

First Reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 3: 12-4:2

Gospel: Luke 21:25-28; 34-36

PREPARATION FOR A SPECIAL VISITOR: "WAITING FOR A VERY IMPORTANT PERSON" (VIP)

Today we begin the season of Advent. With the beginning of Advent, we begin a new church 'year.' It is a time of waiting, preparation and the renewal of hope. Several elements of the Advent message can be discerned to include the following

- Announcement of Good News
- Preparation for imminent intervention of God
- Growing anticipation, expectancy and hope

Advent is a time of waiting for the coming of a very important personage. This person is much bigger than any of the very important people (VIP) that sometimes visit us for various reasons. When I was a schoolboy on the Copperbelt, in the mid 1970s and early 1980s, I always looked forward to a visit of a dignitary from Lusaka. Whenever an announcement was made that a minister, Prime Minister or even the President was to visit our school, I would look forward to the visit with great anticipation, hope and joy. In preparation for the visit, we would be instructed to sweep the school grounds, paint trees and scrub our classrooms in order to impress our visitor. In the school fraternity, there would be an air of expectancy and one could sense the excitement running through the whole community ranging from the teachers down to the toilet cleaner. Our teachers would teach us on how to behave in front of the visitors; we would learn new songs to sing before the visitors and we would be instructed to wear our best uniforms on the appointed day. In my small mind, I always thought that the coming of such an important personage would transform my own life and the life of my school. Frequently, the visitor would come and go and nothing would change except for the paint on trees and a new look school ground that would last for a few days after the visit. A few days after the visit, it would be business as usual.

Just as we do when receiving VIPs in our ordinary lives, so we do with Our Lord who has promised to change our lives for the better. That is why we await his coming patiently and with hope. We wait with the expectation that the coming of Our Lord will fill us with happiness. God has made promises of peace, justice and joy. Our joy comes from the fact that we are expecting that God's promises will be fulfilled. *God will send the promised Messiah*

The readings for the four Sundays of Advent invite us to look forward with great anticipation to the coming of the Messiah who will come to usher in the Kingdom of God. Advent is a time of expectancy, and longing, of promise and fulfillment. The invitation of the Gospel today is to stay awake to be alert to the signs of the Kingdom.

In the first reading today, the people of God have recently returned from Exile. The time of Exile was a painful period. The people longed to go back to the land and received encouragement from the prophets. Finally, God intervened in the lives and allowed them to go back to Palestine.

It is an announcement of the Good News about the imminent intervention of God in our lives. The prophet provides encouraging words about God's action in our lives. He suggests that salvation will come via a branch of David.

Jeremiah reminds us that *'the days are coming when God will fulfill the promises he made to bring about our happiness.'*

These encouraging words from the prophet engender hope and joy in the hearts of the exiles. The prophet reminds the people that God acting through the Messiah, the descendant of David, has inaugurated the salvation long promised to his people. This salvation will be effected through the branch of David. The time for reconstruction and rehabilitation has begun. This is the cause of great rejoicing and renewal of faith in God. God has fulfilled the promises he made to his people.

What about us, do we fulfill the promises we make to other people? Do our leaders act on the promises they make when they come seeking our votes?

The coming of the Lord in our lives has practical implications. Firstly, it implies that we do our part in order to ensure that when the Lord comes, we are ready as the gospel encourages us to be. Secondly, it implies that we examine our surrounding and identify the things that block the happiness promised by God to be actual. What are those serious and urgent problems blocking the reign of God in our country at the moment?

Is our country a peaceful, just and loving society? Is it a country where every one enjoys economic, cultural and social rights? Is it a society founded on truth and the wisdom of God?

One way of checking whether we act on promises we make to other people is by examining our individual, community, parish and national life. For example, a married couple might ask themselves whether they keep their marriage promises. Similarly, our religious leaders can ask themselves whether they provide good examples to the flock they lead. Our political leaders, too, need to examine their utterances and match them with actions.

The second reading is an invitation from the apostle to prepare ourselves for the impending coming of the Lord. At the time that this letter was written, there was a heightened expectation that the second coming of the Lord was very soon. As a response we are encouraged to a lifestyle that pleases God. It is God who initiates a growth in the spirit that culminates in our holiness.

God himself will confirm our 'hearts in holiness' and ensure that we are 'blameless in his sight'. The apostle encourages us to 'make more progress' in our spiritual lives so that we will be ready for the day the Lord will come.

The expectation of the coming of the Lord is a reminder that we should prepare ourselves to receive him. The Gospel speaks about the final coming of our Lord. It announces that the 'Son of Man is coming on a cloud' reminding us of the prophecy of Daniel. This announcement engenders a sense of anticipation, expectancy and hope. This is a message that reminds us to be vigilant. While waiting we should prepare with confidence, vigilance and prayer. We should stay awake and be alert for the coming of Jesus Christ.

The coming of the Son of Man heralds the beginning of liberation. This liberation comes through the Son of Man who has power and comes in glory. This imminent arrival engenders in us anticipation, high expectations and hope.

God desires our happiness. However, this happiness can only become actual in our lives when an 'upright branch of David' enters our lives. Then the promise of happiness will be fulfilled. From then we will live safe and secure lives. In order to allow this branch to enter our lives we should be alert and vigilant so that when he comes he will find us ready.

Let us then renew ourselves by working for a just society that guarantees peace and fullness of our lives even as we look forward to the coming of the Messiah.

Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen...

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING IN SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

- What situations block the happiness God desires for each one of us?
- What poses a threat to peace and justice in our country today?
- What practical steps we can we take to promote peace and justice as we await the Lord's coming?

SKETCH

Have two people, a man and a woman, to act as a couple that is quite rich and lives a comfortable life. The couple goes to the village to ask for one of the relatives, a young girl, to stay with them in town. They promise her grandmother that they would take the child to school. However, the child is not in school like their own children but does all the cooking and cleaning at home. One day, the couple listens to a homily about treating others unjustly and get touched. They decide to send the child to school and the girl is doing very well at school. They are all now a happy family and pray to God to be alert to injustices.

COMMUNITY PRAYERS

- Lord, you share with us of your many good things; enable those who are prosperous to see beyond their interests that they may help those in need, *Lord hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- Lord, you promise never to forsake us, help all lonely, isolated people to experience hope, *Lord hear our prayer!, Lord graciously hear us!*

- Lord, you call us to peace and wholeness; may those who have died for justice inspire us with courage, *Lord hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*

