

# Preparing for Christ



## Advent Year C

### Week I

### Introduction

If today's readings had to be summed up in a few words, they might be: "Don't worry. I read the end of the book, and we, the good guys, win." All three communities addressed in today's readings are suffering some sort of persecution: Jeremiah was addressing Judahites in exile. The Thessalonian community, to whom Paul writes, is undergoing some unnamed difficulty and are struggling with questions regarding the resurrection and Luke's community suffered from the persecution that all early Christians underwent first from Jewish and then from Roman authorities.

Advent begins with a reflection on the end times. We will meditate on God's triumph over our sins, God's promise to the Old Testament people of a new covenant, the end times, and further reflection on what our response to the end times, in the light of Jesus' saving work, should be.

#### **Old Testament Reading: Jer. 33:14-16**

14 "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 15 In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring forth for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 16 In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'

#### **New Testament Reading: 1 Thess. 3:12-4:2**

12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men, as we do to you, 13 so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. 4: 1 Finally, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, you do so more and more. 2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

## Gospel Reading: Luke 21: 25-28, 34-36

25 "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, 26 men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 And then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. 28 Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." 34 "But take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare; 35 for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole earth. 36 But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man."

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## Points to Ponder

### Jeremiah 33:14-16

Jeremiah the prophet was active during the last days of the Kingdom of Judah , the Southern Kingdom. As you may recall Israel (the Northern kingdom) had been destroyed by Assyria in 722 BC but Judah under King Ahaz (735-715) escaped that fate by becoming a vassal of Assyria. A vassal is a ruler who acknowledges another as having authority over them. King Ahaz submitted to Assyria against the advice of Isaiah and aligned Judah with Assyria for protection against neighboring kingdoms who were trying to depose him. The price to be paid as a vassal state was high; Judah was expected to pay tribute and worship the Assyrian gods. Ahaz' son Hezekiah (725-687 BC), "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (II Kg: 18:3)." Ahaz' tried to gain more independence from Assyria, he instituted sweeping religious reform but he was unable to achieve independence. He was succeeded by his son Manasseh (687-642).

Jeremiah was born during the reign of Manasseh. According to the Book of Kings (II Kg: 21:1-18) Manasseh did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. As a loyal and apparently enthusiastic subject of Assyria, he erected altars for Ba'al and Asherah in the Temple and other places. Even worse, he allowed human sacrifice, even sacrificing his own son to the gods. Anyone who objected was dealt with severely. It was the sins of Manasseh and the great religious and moral decay over which he presided that led to the destruction of Jerusalem (II Kings (21:13). He was followed by his son Amon, who also did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Apparently Amon was politically inept as well as



he was soon assassinated and succeeded by Josiah. Assyria began to experience internal decay and Judah was able to obtain independence. Josiah instituted sweeping religious reforms, greater than any in Judah's history. During his reign the "Book of the Law" (*Deuteronomy*) which had been lost, was found and reforms were implemented. It seems by Jeremiah's preaching that while he was supportive of the reform, he was extremely disappointed in its results or lack of results; peoples' hearts were not changed and social injustices continued. Josiah was succeeded by Jehoahaz, his son, but he was soon deposed and replaced by Jehoiakim who reigned for 11 years (*II Kgs. 23:36*). Under his rule, religious reform was neglected and pagan practices were tolerated. Jeremiah responded to this with renewed vigor in his preaching, predicting the inevitable end of Judah because of the lack of repentance of the people. He was severely persecuted for his preaching and his mistreatment is detailed in the Book of Jeremiah.

Judah became a vassal of Babylon shortly after Jehoiakim died (*perhaps assassinated*) in 597. Many of the nobility including the King who succeeded Jehoiakim (*Jehoiachin, or Jeconiah, his son*) were deported to Babylon. Zedekiah was made king of Judah, but was coerced by the ever patriotic but politically naïve nobles who were perhaps inspired by the theology that God would never allow Jerusalem to be destroyed he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. This led to the razing of the Jerusalem and the temple in 587, the slaying of Zedekiah's sons, and his deportation to Babylon.

Jeremiah began to preach during the reign of Josiah. His early preaching consisted of warnings of doom and calls to repent. After Josiah died Jehoiakim allowed the reforms to lapse. The ascendancy of the Babylonians became clear and Jeremiah realized that doom was certain and his warnings became sharper. After the exile, Jeremiah began to preach hope for the remnant. These hopeful passages are found in the "Book of Consolation" (*Jer. 30-33.26*). Today's reading from Jeremiah is from this "Book of Consolation," a message of hope delivered in both poetry and prose. This passage echoes in part an earlier passage in Jeremiah (*23:5-6*).

This "Book of Consolation" is placed in the middle of some biographical information about the prophet. In the previous chapters, we are told of Jeremiah's difficulties during the reign of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah; he was threatened with death (*26:8*) and disputed with other prophets (*Ch. 28 and 29*). Following the Book of Consolation the stories about Jeremiah's difficulties and persecution are continued. It is perhaps not a coincidence that this portion of the book sandwiched between stories of the persecution of Jeremiah serve as a message of consolation to anyone who is in the midst of severe trials.

The theme of the Book of Consolation is that Jerusalem will be rebuilt and that a New Covenant will be made with the people, one that would last forever. God's mercy will triumph even over the sins of the people that led to the Exile. This portion of Jeremiah was written right before or during the exile when the situation faced by the remnant was quite grim. With that in mind, read Jer. 33:14-16 out loud. Imagine how these words must have sounded to the defeated and exiled Judahites. The day is coming when a righteous branch will spring forth for David: a Davidic king will again rule. God has promised this, and it will be so.



## 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2

As most already know Paul was a zealous Jew, a persecutor of early Christians, who encountered Christ in a most dramatic way (*Acts 9*) which led to his conversion. Paul spent the rest of his life preaching the Good News. St. Gregory of Nyssa said of Paul: “No one has known Christ better than Paul nor surpassed him in the careful example he gave of what anyone should be who bears Christ’s name. So precisely did he mirror his Master that he became his very image”. Paul’s story is found in the Book of Acts and much of the New Testament is comprised of his letters. He was quite possibly the first Christian Theologian and certainly the first one that we have a written record of.

Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians is most likely the oldest text of the New Testament (*with the exception of the Aramaic edition of Matthew’s Gospel*). Written around AD 50 Paul was writing to Christians who were experiencing persecution for their faith (*1 Thess. 1:14*) after being converted to the “Way” earlier that same year (*Acts 17*). The Thessalonians, despite having had a shortened catechesis due to Paul’s rapid departure (*Acts 17: 10*) had an abundant and growing faith (*1 Thess. 1: 3*) but they were unclear about the Second Coming and the Resurrection of the Dead. Paul wrote his letters to them in order to answer their questions. Many fundamental Christian teachings can be found in these letters written only 20 years after the Resurrection. For example, God is our Father and Jesus is our Lord (*1:1*), the Holy Spirit converts us (*1:5*) and Jesus Christ who was raised from the dead (*1:10*) will come to judge the living and the dead (*4:6*). One key point is the verse that comes directly after today’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading 4:3-4; “For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from immorality, that each of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor...” All Christians, therefore, are called to holiness (*also emphasized in 2:12 and 4:7*), and our reading challenges us to increase and abound in love or charity. Charity is one of the three theological virtues that are imparted to us at Baptism. For charity to “increase and abound” requires prayer and practice on our part. The charity we have will prepare us for the coming of Jesus with all his saints. Charity is not the same thing as human love. Charity is supernatural love, a love that is given first out of love for God, to love God above all else and flowing from that love comes love of neighbor, regardless of how loveable that neighbor might be or not be. In his homily on this passage St. John Chrysostom says: “Loving one person and showing indifference to others is characteristic of human affection but St. Paul is telling us that our love should not be restricted in that way.” He also connects charity with holiness: “It is charity, it is love which makes us blameless.” One is reminded of Paul’s famous passage on charity in 1 Corinthians 13 which ends: “So faith, hope and love (*charity*) abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love (*charity*).

How does charity increase holiness? In “*The Way*” St. Josemaria Escriva reminds us “Deeds are love-not sweet words” (#933). He also tells us, “Don’t say that person bothers me. Think: that person sanctifies me” (#174). Each occasion that we are called to practice love especially when it is inconvenient or difficult is an occasion to grow in holiness.



## Luke: 21: 25-28, 34-36

This passage is part of the “eschatological discourse” that takes up most of Chapter 21. Jesus begins by commenting on the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings and he said: “As for these things that you see, the days will come when there is not one stone left upon one another that will not be thrown down.” (*Lk. 21:5-6*). That passage covers three events: the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, the end of the world and the Second Coming but today’s text focuses on the end of the world. At that time Jesus, the Son of Man, will be revealed to the whole world in power and great glory. Even the very elements of creation will witness to the coming of the Son of Man. Jesus’ title of “Son of Man” evokes the images of Daniel 7:13-14 in which the Son of Man is given “dominion and glory and kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

Luke’s community was likely experiencing persecution for following Jesus and he predicts this persecution in Luke 21:12-19. This discourse is intended to offer consolation and hope. While things are bad now, Jesus is with them and protects them and at the end of the Day, the Day of the Lord, they will be redeemed and vindicated.

So while it is clear that the coming of the Son of Man will involve judgment the disciples are not to fear for those who persevere in faith will be judged favorably. “When these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, for your redemption is near.” But those who do not persevere, who allow themselves to be distracted by the everyday cares of the world or to “dissipation and drunkenness” so that they are not ready for the second coming, the judgment will not be favorable. Vigilance is of utmost importance. So the final “Day of the Lord” is one of joy for the faithful, for they will be reunited with Jesus but a day of fear for the unfaithful, for they will be judged negatively.

### Tying it all together

All three readings are addressed to communities that have suffered persecution. All three communities are in need of words of encouragement and hope. The Judahites have suffered the loss of everything; homeland, temple and many lives. The early Christian communities are suffering for their faith. Each reading offers hope. Jeremiah assures his community that God has not abandoned them no matter how bad it looks for them in the exile. God will restore Jerusalem and a “righteous branch” from David. The passage of Jeremiah is fulfilled in the coming of Christ. Paul assures the Thessalonians that Jesus and his saints” will return, and they who are already living lives “worthy of God” (*1 Thess 2:12*) will be ready to meet him. In Luke Jesus reassures his followers that he will not abandon them but will come in glory and power for the Judgment of the world. Each passage looks forward to the “Day of the Lord.” Jeremiah’s community had already experienced the “terrible” day of the Lord. Jeremiah gives a renewed meaning to the “Day of the Lord” as he imbues it with a Messianic interpretation.



For Christians—us—the Day of the Lord is Judgment Day. We will experience this two ways in the “particular judgment” at our death and the “general judgment” at the end of time. Whether it is terrible or glorious very much depends on the disposition of our soul at the time of death.

## Catechism Connections

- To learn more about the delay of the Second Coming see CCC 673-677.
- To learn how the Sacrament of Penance prepares us for judgment see CCC 1470.
- To learn more about the particular judgment see CCC 1021-1022.

## Rome to Home

*It is significant that in their preaching the prophets link mercy, which they often refer to because of the people’s sins, with the incisive image of love on God’s part. The Lord loves Israel with the love of a special choosing, much like the love of a spouse, and for this reason he pardons its sins and even its infidelities and betrayals. When he finds repentance and true conversion, he brings his people back to grace. In the preaching of the prophets, mercy signifies a special power of love, which prevails over the sin and infidelity of the chosen people. (Dives et Misericordia, #4)*

## Study Questions

*It’s best to read the entire scripture reading for this lesson and Points to Ponder before responding to the questions.*

1. What were some of the reasons that Judah worshipped false gods during the time between Ahaz and Zedekiah (722-687 BC)?





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10. Why do you think that the Church presents these particular texts the first week of Advent?

### **Voices of the Saints**

*Go forth in peace, for you have followed the good road. Go forth without fear, for he who created you has made you holy, has always protected you and loves you as a mother. Blessed be you, my God, for having created me.*

- Saint Clare of Assisi

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Everyone has trials. Think about the deepest and most bitter pain that you have experienced. How did your faith help you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. The theme of vigilance is found throughout the Gospels. What ways do you find helpful to “keep vigilant” since you “know not the time or the hour”? Do you find yourself easily distracted by things in your daily life?