



More about Today's Scriptures

1st Sunday of Advent

Today's readings call us to watchfulness. Isaiah assures us that God works for those who wait in faithfulness, especially through challenging times. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul affirms his readers for their spiritual gifts, which well equip them for the return of the Lord Jesus. In today's gospel, Jesus directs us to "keep awake" (v. 37).

Isaiah 64:1-9

Today's reading is included in a psalm of lamentations and intercession (63:7–64:11). When

"A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent."

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

the exiles returned to their land, they found Israel still desolate and the temple still in ruins (64:10-12). Their conviction that God desired Israel's salvation wavered in the face of the

immense task of restoration and their own continuing sense of sinfulness and alienation.

The prophet cries out for God's glory to be manifested as in the past. Sinfulness now bars the people from God's presence, just as ritual uncleanness barred one from corporate worship. The prophet recognizes the need for a Redeemer, God alone, who would return their hearts to "doing right."

In the space of a few verses, the prophet three times reminds God that "you are our father" (63:16; 64:8). The prophet recalls the fatherhood of God in order to stress God's role as Israel's begetter, the One that gives life and identity to Israel. The prophet's use of the

title Father also reminds his audience of the permanence of their relationship with God. In that relationship rests all their hope.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Paul adapts the customary introduction of ancient letters and combines the usual greetings, "grace" (Greek) and "peace" (Hebrew). These are more than good wishes. They describe the state of salvation as "grace," God's gift, and as "peace," the harmony of the kingdom of God. Paul also freely applies to Jesus terms used of God in the Old Testament, for example, those who "call on the name of our Lord" (Joel 2:32) and "the day of our Lord" (Isaiah 13:6-9; Amos 5:18).

In the thanksgiving, Paul sets forth the themes of the letter. He gives thanks for the same spiritual gifts, speech and knowledge, that were causing so much division in the Corinthian community. Later in the letter he will deal with the misunderstanding and misuse of these gifts (chaps. 12 and 14). They are undoubtedly God-given and confirm "the testimony of Christ" (v. 6), Paul's preaching of the gospel. Here Paul carefully places the Corinthians' present individualistic use of the gifts into a context of future revelation and shared responsibility in the community.

Mark 13:24-37

Chapter 13 of Mark is known as the "little Apocalypse." The Greek word *apokalypsis* means revelation, disclosure or uncovering. Such writing usually comes out of tribulation, which is interpreted through signs and symbols to disclose the unseen reality of God's presence and purpose beneath the appearance of disaster.



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Jesus' terse parable about the deputized servants who await the master's return urges us to live in that balance between keen anticipation and faithful obedience. The former without the latter may lead to idleness and a neglect of service. An unwavering commitment to responsibilities without an eager hope may result in feelings of drudgery and despair or spiritual and moral lassitude. The final word to all is: "Keep awake!"

Reflection

When Jesus warns us to be constantly alert, we might take that ominously, as though some distant, punitive deity is waiting eagerly to pounce on our slightest mistake. But we can think of this gospel more positively.

Our news reports are filled with pictures of families awaiting the return of spouses, offspring, siblings and parents from war in Iraq or Afghanistan. When the buses roll in, sometimes at odd hours of the night, gyms are packed with

welcome banners and fluttering flags. As each beloved soldier emerges, families and friends explode with joy. The same phenomenon occurs at airports. Observe the faces scanning each arriving passenger, then see them light up as a familiar, beloved figure emerges into the waiting area.

Do we await Christ's coming with the same happy anticipation? Would we rush delightedly into his arms if he appeared suddenly at our doors? "I've waited so long for you!" we might cry. "And I'm so glad to see you." If we don't think of a reunion with Jesus that way, why not? Are we happier lugging around our own doubtful baggage of guilt, resentment or depression? What welcome banner might you prepare for him?