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The First Sunday of Advent (B)

"Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 63:!)! Is this not the quintessential cry of the human heart that rises up to God: "rend the heavens and come down"!

The Psalmist, too, echoes these words of the prophet: "O shepherd of Israel, hearken, from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth. Rouse your power, and come to save us" (Psalm 80:2-3)! Yes, this is the cry of every human heart, whether we recognize it or not.

We want God to enter into our midst and set all things right. We long for justice to be meted out to the nations, for wrongs to be righted and the dead to be raised; in short, we long to be with Christ. We long for "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 1:8) when the Lord will "wipe away the tears from all faces" (Isaiah 25:8). This tremendous and unrestrainable longing is fulfilled in the hope of Jesus Christ because he has come to us and he will come again. This is the hope of Advent.

The Lord rent the heavens and came down upon Mount Sinai when he gave Moses the Law and led the people from slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea. The Lord rent the heavens again - albeit quietly - and came down when he was born in Bethlehem and

the angels announced his birth to the shepherds. The Lord rends the heavens and comes down whenever a priest invokes the Holy Spirit in the Sacraments. The Lord will rend the heavens one final time and come down at the end of time, which is also the end of all things. Yes, Lord, rend the heavens and come down! Fulfill our hope!

From where does this deep longing for God come? From within our very being. Saint Augustine hit the proverbial nail squarely on the head when he said, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."¹ Advent, then, is the season to long for God, to yearn for him, to ache for him. We long for the peace of Christ, which the world cannot give, for the rest that comes only with the coming of the Lord (cf. John 14:27).

The words of our Lord today underscore and highlight the watchfulness that must mark these days for every Christian. At the beginning of Advent we watch for the coming of the Lord at the end of time when he will judge the living and the dead. For this reason we will pray at the end of this Mass that our reception of the Body and Blood of the Lord will "teach us to love heaven. May its promise and hope guide our way on earth."²

The Lord tells us to watch and be alert for his coming that "he might not come suddenly and find you sleeping" (Mark 13:).

¹ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* I.1.

² *Roman Missal, First Sunday of Advent, Prayer after Communion.*

The Lord speaks this command to every person in every age, "for that day will come to every single one, when the day comes for him to leave this life, such as it is, to be judged on the last day."³ Death - or the Second Coming - will come for us all, and we must be prepared for that day.

It may seem strange to speak of death at the beginning of Advent, but given the two purposes of Advent death is a fitting consideration. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ the Lord we remember that he was born of the Virgin Mary to liberate us from unending death and to give us everlasting life. As we prepare for his Second Coming we remember that we must be prepared to welcome him when at last he comes.

For all who are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ - for all who are members of his Body - death is not a moment to be feared, but to be welcomed and embraced. It is, rather, the moment of joyful hope, the very culmination of life, when we look upon the face of the Lord and be saved (cf. Psalm 80:4). It is the moment when the deepest longings of the human heart will be realized, satisfied and fulfilled. The Christian, then, says with Saint Francis of Assisi:

Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no living man can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin. Blessed are those whom death will find in

³ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Letter 199, To Hesychius*, 3.

Your most holy will, for the second death shall do them no harm.⁴

Our first death happened at the moment of Baptism when we died with Christ and rose with him to new life. The second death - bodily death - shall not harm us because we are already dead, and yet we are alive in Christ.

If we live with this moment of encounter with the Lord ever in mind - if we live with the moment of death in mind - then we will live well. The consideration of death gives purpose, meaning and direction to life. It leads us to follow ever more faithfully after Jesus Christ. It leads us to cry out with the Psalmist, "take care of this vine, and protect what your right hand has planted" (Psalm 80:16).

King David once prayed, "LORD, let me know my end, the number of my days, that I may learn how frail I am" (Psalm 39:5). He went on to pray, "And now, LORD, what future do I have? You are my only hope" (Psalm 39:8). In Christ alone is salvation and life.

Indeed, Saint Paul tells us that the Lord has bestowed his grace upon us and we were "enriched in every way" (I Corinthians 1:8). Every morning we awake, the Lord Jesus gives us the grace to attain heaven; we need only cooperate with this grace. It is our confident hope that the Lord "will keep [us] firm to the

⁴ Saint Francis of Assisi, *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, 12-13, in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*. Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady, trans. and eds. (Mahway, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1982), 39.

end, irreproachable on the day our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 1:). We are confident in this hope because "God is faithful, and by him [we] were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (I Corinthians 1:9).

Someone once said, "Unless you have found something worth dying for, you have not really lived." Is life with Christ worth dying for? The martyrs have all answered this question with a resounding, "Yes!" God himself answered with a resounding, the "yes" of Jesus Christ (cf. II Corinthians 1:19). Indeed, Christ Jesus desires us to be with him so greatly that he gave his own life to free us from the tyranny of sin and death.

It is his desire for us that gives us hope, that increases within us the longing for his coming in glory. Let each of us live these Advent days well and be found watching and waiting for him in joyful hope and eager expectation. Amen!