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The First Sunday of Advent (C)

Dear brothers and sisters, "your redemption is at hand"  
(Luke 21:28).

Today the watching and the waiting begin. Today we begin with the Psalmist: "Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and for you I wait all the day" (Psalm 25:5). We want to be taught how to love like him.

We watch, yes, and we wait, but we do not simply watch and wait: we prepare so that the day of his coming will not "catch [us] by surprise like a trap" (Luke 21:34-35). We prepare for that day when "the powers in the heavens will be shaken" and we see Christ our King "coming in a cloud with power and glory" (Luke 21:27).

Jesus told the Apostles, "I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be" (John 14:3) and "I am coming soon" (Revelation 22:20). Today he tells us through his Prophet: "The days are coming . . . when I will fulfill the promise I made" (Jeremiah 33:14). We know that when he does come at last he will "judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end" (Nicene Creed).

In these past several weeks we have seen that we will be judged according to our love, according to our acceptance of and

imitation of the love of Christ Jesus. For this reason Saint Paul prays:

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we have for you, so as to strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones (I Thessalonians 3:12-13).

Love, then, produces and deepens holiness, and those who are holy will recognize Christ, "the Lord our justice" (Jeremiah 33:16). If we desire to be holy, if we desire to be saints, we must love as God has first loved us (cf. I John 4:19).

Already there are many distractions that vie for our attention that keep us from growing in love. Rooms must be cleaned, presents must be purchased and wrapped, houses need decorating, cookies need to be baked and friends and family need to be visited. Already on top of work, school and family duties, all of this is enough to make one sick.

Jesus warns us of these distractions and he speaks against them, calling us to prepare, to watch and wait:

Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap... Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the

tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man (Luke 21:34-36).

It is all too easy for us to be caught up in the hustle and bustle of these weeks before Christmas. In doing so we lose sight of the primary focus of these days and we deprive ourselves of the grace of God. It is also tempting for us to decorate our homes as though Christmas has already come. Remember this season of Advent and join Holy Mother Church as she watches and waits for the coming of the Lord. If we bypass Advent altogether and skip right ahead to Christmas, we again deprive ourselves of the grace of God.

There are many good and necessary tasks to be completed, it is true, but we must remember also our Lord's words to Martha: "you are worried and anxious about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her" (Luke 10:41-42).

This holy season of Advent is given us as a time to prepare ourselves for the return of the King. If we take the time and the effort to clean our house for earthly guests and visitors, should we not also take the time and the effort to cleanse our soul for the coming of the great King of heaven and earth? This is the very goal of Advent: to cleanse the house of our soul to receive the Lord. We do not want to be caught off guard and

unprepared when at last he comes. How, then, can we choose the better part? How are we to prepare ourselves for his coming?

We would do well to spend time with the Lord each day asking him to increase our faith, hope and love. Time spent with him is always time well spent, for "good and upright is the LORD; thus he shows sinners the way. He guides the humble to justice, and teaches the humble his way" (Psalm 25:8-9). He will teach us the way of love.

We cannot truly accept his love without being changed by his love. The experience of the wonder and power of his love must also lead us to a greater desire to turn from sin and to a true and sincere repentance. If we accept his love, grow in his love and share his love, we will be given "the strength to ... stand before the Son of Man," for the love of God is stronger than even death itself (Luke 21:36).

We grow in his love by remaining close to him. Advent invites to spend time quietly with the Lord, loving him and letting him love us. Such common practices as the Advent wreath and the Jesse Tree help us to do this, as does frequent attendance at Mass, frequent confession and acts of love. Let us focus this Advent season not on the giving and receiving of gifts or on the frantic busy-ness of these days, but on the love of the Lord Jesus who came to us at Christmas and will come to us again with power and glory.