



## Week 1

Be alert, be ready, be on guard. 'Stand up and raise your heads' (Lk 21:28). We know Advent as a season of waiting, but the exhortations from this first week suggest that this waiting is anything but passive. Although advent is a gentler season than lent it is no less active. It is a season of active waiting, alert and hopeful for the possibility of the Christmas event. This is something like the waiting of parents expecting their first baby – a very bodily thing, complete with the butterflies of joy and trepidation. Expectant parents can feel such joy at the prospect of new life, yet at the same time there is trepidation about the baby's well-being and that their own lives will be utterly transformed.

The Advent season is full of images and stories of parents and their children. The active waiting conveys the great longing for the coming of God (in the tiny shape of a newborn baby). The longings of the human heart are part of the human condition. There is a yearning for the transcendent that cannot stay hidden forever. Why do people climb Everest, build cathedrals like Chartres or tombs like the Taj Mahal, write and read poetry, compose and listen to symphonies, undertake the Camino de Santiago and pilgrimage to Lough Derg? We discover in us high instincts and depth of resources, the raw human spirit calling out for connection to something larger than ourselves.

All who believe in a personal God, including Christians, believe that this longing is planted in us by God and can only be satisfied through relationship with him. Healthy relationship with God influences our relationships with ourselves and with others, including the world in which we live. All our deepest desires are, in one form or another, a desire for God. Advent liturgies articulate that longing under different figures – Wisdom, the Root of Jesse, the house of David, Emmanuel – and help us to bring to the surface our deep-rooted desire for God.

'Maranatha' (Come O Lord) was a prayer of the early Christians so popular that it retained its Aramaic form among Greek speakers. These early Christians saw their

earthly lives as transitory and limited and knew they should be always ready for the coming of their Lord. We read this warning today in Luke's Gospel: 'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap' (Lk 21: 34-35). Their outlook and vision of human life in a precarious world lit up by the presence and promise of Christ is as relevant and inspiring as ever.

Today, Luke's Gospel encourages us to do two seemingly incompatible things – to be realistic about the world around us and yet not to lose hope in the future. This is difficult. By retelling the Jesus story again with every Advent season, the memory of God's love becomes the ground of our hope. The future holds hope because of the past; the love of God was revealed in a totally new way when God sent his son as a newborn to bring us back to Godself. That's why the Advent season resonates with the parent within us; that is why we begin each Church year by retelling the Christmas story. [567]