

Advent Homilies in Response to the HIV/AIDS Pandemic

Introduction

The Advent Season has two parts. The first part extends from the First Sunday of Advent to the 16th December; while the second part is the period 17th-24th December. The Third Sunday of Advent can fall in either part. Happily, this year it falls on the 16th December, the last day of the first period, which brings out the full meaning of the liturgy of this day as the closing of the time for thinking of the Coming of the Lord in wider terms including the Coming in Glory to Judge. The proper of *Gaudete* Sunday indicates joy at the approach of Christmas, but the Lectionary Readings are clearly intended for the first part of Advent. The Fourth Sunday of Advent has a theme which is obviously that of the second phase of Advent, an immediate preparation for Christmas, and the emphasis must be on celebrating the Incarnation.

For most parishioners, awareness of Advent is limited to their Sunday Mass. This means three Sundays for renewal and one for Christmas preparation. This pastoral material is restricted to the first three Sundays of Advent. It is hoped that extending AIDS Sunday over these three Sundays will boost awareness and participation in the archdiocesan Three Year Plan for an effective response to HIV/AIDS. 'Preaching' is one of the priority means that our archbishop wished featured in the Three Year Plan.

There are three priority concerns that make up the Three Year Plan: Prevention, Mitigation and Care of the Vulnerable. Emphasis is being placed this year on Prevention.

The Lectionary

Unlike Sundays in Ordinary Time, all the readings have been chosen to focus on a single main theme. Also unlike Ordinary Sundays, the theme is set, not by the Gospel Reading, but by the First Reading! Among the prophets Isaiah dominates as the greatest messianic prophet, only in year C are other prophets used. Advent recalls the long wait for the Promised Messiah and the Old Testament reflects this longing and waiting. That we still 'wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ' is brought to our attention by the second reading, chosen from the New Testament letters to be relevant to the theme. The Gospel is chosen from the Evangelist for the year again to support the theme of the Sunday and to make it relevant to the choices we must make for our own circumstances in our own time.

Themes for Year A

First Sunday: Walk in the Light

Isaiah (2:1-5) sets the tone with his clarion cry to walk in the light (v.5) in contrast to the darkness of a people who have abandoned God and turned to evil (1:16b-17).

Second Sunday: A call to Conversion

Isaiah (11:1-10) speaks of evil which will be uprooted (vv.4-5) by the shoot from the stock of Jesse (v.6-9) – a signal for the peoples (v.10).

Third Sunday: Take hope and do not fear

Isaiah (35:1-6,10) tells of a restored fertility (vv.1-6) which will be cause for rejoicing: "They will celebrate and shout because all sorrows and worries will be gone far away" (v.10).

First Sunday of Advent Year A

HOMILY

It would be hard for us not to know that yesterday was World AIDS Day as it was made known to everyone through radio, T.V. and in all the newspapers. All churches will be keeping today as a Day of Prayer and, because this is so important for our time, our Local Church of the Archdiocese of Johannesburg is extending this time of prayer until the third Sunday of Advent.

While Advent is a time to prepare for the great feast of Christmas, the first three Sundays are more concerned with the Second Coming of Jesus as a Saving Judge of all humanity: "All nations will weep when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (*Mt 24:30 Contemporary English Version*). By introducing Isaiah as the great prophet foretelling the First Coming of the Messiah, the liturgy of the Church is calling on us to wait in joyful hope for his final Coming in the same spirit as God's People of old. Isaiah was prophesying to a people who felt helpless under the rule of foreigners. In the time of Jesus things were very similar under the domination of the Roman Empire. So, powerless to do anything for themselves, the people looked forward to the Promised Messiah as the only one able restore their kingdom and their freedom as God's Chosen Nation. We experience this same inability to do anything in our own time. How can individual nations achieve any progress in stemming the disasters arising from Global Warming without a single great leader to gain the cooperation of all countries around the world? Or, more to the point for AIDS Day, how can we as a Parish do anything effective about the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which is taking the lives of more than a thousand South Africans every day? Because we feel so totally unable to do anything, there is the danger that we do nothing, just carry on with our lives as if nothing was happening.

"When the Son of Man appears, things will be just as they were when Noah lived. People were eating and drinking and getting married right up to the day that the flood came and Noah went into the big boat" (*Mt. 24:38 CEV*).

The HI Virus comes like a thief in the night. We know nothing about it around us until there is an unexpected funeral. It has no barriers and we are shocked when sudden gaps appear in our society, neighbourhood or workplaces.

"Two men will be in the same field, but only one will be taken. The other will be left. Two women will be together grinding grain, but only one will be taken. (*Mt 24:40-41 CEV*).

The Gospel message calls on us to be "always on guard", "Always be ready!" Not a few HIV+ people are without any fault. Contact with infected blood at birth or during a blood transfusion or exchange of infected sexual fluids with unfaithful infected marriage partners or due to rape are all causes. However, it cannot be denied that in the majority of cases, infection is the result of bad choices that have been made. The most vulnerable to infection by the HI Virus are teenagers and young adults. These are still struggling to attain full adult maturity and make responsible choices in the face of a media that portrays heroes and heroines acting irresponsibly. There are still some not ready to save themselves from this 'tsunami' or who fail to protect their families from the silent evil which steals its children.

The Southern African HIV Clinicians Association, which brings together physicians who are specialists in this field, tells us that while the prevalence in different populations are not the same, the highest incidence is to be found where the prevalence is least and so no group can consider themselves immune. In fact they paint a bleak picture for the future as the productive part of the population succumbs to the disease and the consequence begins to be seen of a change from national development dropping back to a state of under-development, which will affect everyone. The flood cannot be managed unless Faith Based Organisations manage to “turn off the tap!”

The Church has often been called ‘The Barque of Peter’ and it is the ‘Ark of Salvation’ even for stemming of the tide of HIV/AIDS. The Parish Community must build itself into a Saving Community and this applies also to HIV/AIDS for it is a mistake to treat HIV/AIDS simply as a disease. We must be alert to what Pope John Paul II called a spiritual immune-deficiency virus which breaks down our resistance to evil.

The bishops of Africa have given clear guidelines during their meeting in Dakar in 2003, now four years ago. Our contribution to eliminating HIV/AIDS is to preach Christian values on the sacredness of our gift of Sexuality. The bishops committed all the structures of the Church to this campaign. The most important and effective structure of the Church is the Parish, which brings together the families, the Domestic Churches of the Parish. It is especially in the Domestic Church, the Family, that true effective education in human sexuality must be given. Many parents may find this task difficult. In spite of the explicit portrayal of sex in the media, there is often a reluctance to talk about it to one’s own teenagers. As part of the Archdiocesan Three Year Plan to initiate a Christian response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, each Parish is being asked to set up workshops where parents can get together with their teenage children, learn more of the medical advances in the understanding of sexuality, be clearer about the teaching of the Church and be given a comfortable opportunity to start a family discussion on human sexuality and responsible choices in life.

Chapter one of the prophet Isaiah deals with the sad state of Israel, which had been devastated by war and Judah besieged. “Your country is laid waste, your cities are burnt with fire” (*Is. 1:7*); only a remnant of the nation remained. Today’s reading (*Is 2:1-5*) is a vision of future restoration – hope in a hopeless situation. The Isaiah’s vision of hope is preceded by a call to conversion – to a return to the good choices set before them by the Lord in the Law he gave to Moses.

Paul, too, exhorts us to adopt the right choices in life and avoid the wrong ones.

“It is time to wake up. [...] We must stop behaving as people do in the dark and be ready to live in the light. So behave properly as people do in the day. Don’t go to wild parties or get drunk or be vulgar or indecent. [...] Let the Lord Jesus be as near to you as the clothes you wear. Then you won’t try to satisfy your selfish desires” (*Rom 13:11-14 CEV*).

The call is to stay awake, and appear in the light (*Rom*) and walk in the light. The good news is that the pandemic can be stopped and so we should rejoice to hear the invitation to “Let us go to the house of the Lord” (*Psalms*) and listen to his voice.

PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL

- P. Stir up your power, O Lord, and come!
May we deserve your protection.
Deliver us from all threatening dangers.
Listen graciously to the needs we place before you.
1. Lord, we pray for the Church of Johannesburg and for each of its Parishes:
Bless the Three Year Plan to combat HIV/AIDS in our archdiocese. Prompt us with your grace that we do not give way to our own helplessness. Awaken us from our inaction and arouse us to bring our families into the Ark of God's teaching so that we be protected from the flood that threatens to overwhelm us. **Lord hear us.**
 2. We pray for the Domestic Church:
Protect every family with your loving care. May it be a secure home, where God is worshipped and given glory by the Christian values which inspire the daily lives of each of its members. Guard them from the pernicious flouting of promiscuous sexual behaviour in the media. Assist parents in their duty to speak constructively with their children about the gift of sexuality as a share in God's creative power. **Lord hear us.**
 3. We pray for Teenagers:
Lord look with understanding on young people and their zest for life and desire to find out for themselves. Let your Word instruct them, light up their way and keep them safe from all harm. Teach them how to make the right choices in life and to set boundaries for themselves in dialogue with their parents and those who love them. **Lord hear us.**
 4. We pray for all those infected with HIV/AIDS:
We bring before you all who live with HIV and AIDS, families and communities broken and struggling to survive. Give them the courage of your peace. In the power of the Spirit, bless all who offer loving care and who work to sustain and rebuild communities. God of healing and hope, save us and help us. **Lord hear us.**
 5. We pray for all who find themselves marginalised by society:
God of love and faith, we place before you all who are shunned and condemned by their neighbours; all who find themselves isolated and alone; all who fear for their children's future without them; all who are denied treatment; all who are abused. Give them the assurance of your unfailing love. **Lord hear us.**
 6. *(Other intentions may be added, especially for HIV/AIDS initiatives already taking place in the Parish)*
- P. Let us pray with longing and waiting for the Lord:
Father in heaven, our hearts desire the warmth of your love and our minds are searching for the light of your Word. Increase our longing for Christ our Saviour and give us the strength to grow in love, that the dawn of his coming may find us rejoicing in his presence and welcoming the light of truth.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.
(Alternative Prayer for 1st Sunday of Advent)

Second Sunday in Advent Year A

HOMILY

Saint Bernard speaks of not just two but three comings of the Lord (*Office of Readings Wednesday, 1st week of Advent*). There is his coming in weakness by birth and his future coming in majesty and glory but in between is his invisible third coming. It is a hidden coming in spirit and in power. “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word and my Father will love him, and we will come to him” (*John 14:23*). We are able to place an obstacle to this coming: “Anyone who does not love me does not keep my words” (*John 14:24*). Today’s liturgy reflects on the resistance we can place and calls for our repentance and conversion.

Isaiah describes God’s care for his people in terms of a Vineyard (*Is 5:1-7*) every care is lavished upon it but when it yields only sour grapes he takes down the fences and allows his animals to graze and trample it down. Through Isaiah, God offers a sign of his protection: “A maiden is with child and she will give birth to a son whom she will call Emmanuel”. But the sign is rejected and the king led the nation in ways contrary to God’s paths (*Is 7:14*). The result was destruction and the land was laid waste. It was in these circumstances that Isaiah gave a poetic message of future peace, where God’s Word would be law in all the land and where nothing harmful would take place: “The time is coming when one of David’s descendants [from the stock of Jesse] will be the signal for all the nations to come together. They will follow his advice and his own nation will become famous” (*Is 11:1-10 Contemporary English Version*).

The message is for us a call to conversion, a call to unite together under the banner of Jesus, Son of David, and resolve to follow his ways so that we enjoy a time of peace where God’s law rules in the land and no harm is done to anyone. It was the task of John the Baptist to announce that the time had come for the fulfilment of the prophesy of Isaiah and call for repentance: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand” (*Mt 3:11*). John goes on to convince us of the wrath of God, mentioned in Isaiah’s parable of the Vineyard, which we can calm only with God’s mercy: “Any tree which fails to bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire. I baptise you in water for repentance, but the one who follows me is more powerful than I am, [...]; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (*Mt 3:11*). The message is loud and clear: “Get the road ready for the Lord! Make a straight path for him” (*Mt 3:3 CEV*).

In a rural area where there are only dirt roads, it is clear that after heavy storms the roads are damaged. Should someone important be visiting the area the authorities rush in to grade the roads and mend the damage done. But no one will come to do this repair unless the local community have acknowledged that the road is in need of attention. This is the message of John the Baptist and receiving his baptism was an acknowledgement of sinfulness. If Jesus, who was sinless, was able to ask for this baptism, why are we so slow to admit that we are sinners? Today we don’t like to concede that we have done wrong and we use the difficult circumstances that led us to make bad choices as reasons for denial of sin. When we do that we cannot obtain forgiveness. We have to brave the immersion into the waters of repentance and sorrow. Although John spoke so forthrightly to Scribes and Pharisees, he was gentle enough with those despised as sinners, the tax-collectors and soldiers. Jesus was the same and he was happy to dine with sinners, who through knowing God’s mercy loved much. The closer we can humble ourselves and identify with sinners, forgiven sinners, the greater will be our love and there will be no such thing as ‘stigma’.

Paul tells us that “Everything that was written long ago in the scriptures was meant to teach us something about hope from the examples scripture gives of how people who did not give up were helped by God.” The Paul prays: “May he who helps us when we refuse to give up, help you all to be tolerant with each other, following the example of Christ Jesus [...]. It can only be to Gods glory, for you to treat each other in the same friendly way as Christ treated you” (*Rom 15:4-5,7*).

“There go I but for the grace of God!” can be used with a rather condescending self-righteous way implying that by God’s grace I am not a sinner. This does not square with attitude of Christ or his parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee who went up to the Temple to pray. The Advent call to repentance is a call to contrition – to brokenness of heart – in which we know ourselves as sinners, always in need of God’s Mercy. Only from such a position can we offer true compassion to other sinners as equals. Jesus identified himself with us as sinners when he asked John for baptism. John was reluctant as he felt that it was he who should be baptised by Jesus. But as Jesus told him “For now this is how it should be, because we must do all that God wants us to do” (*Mt 3:15 CEV*). Is it so hard to admit that we are sinners? Are we not guilty of many sins? It is only when we can know ourselves as sinners that we can show true compassion and administer the mercy of God to others. It is only as forgiven sinners that we can enter heaven or otherwise the prostitutes and tax collectors are entering before us!

The Church puts on our lips today the Messianic psalm 72. It praises kingship which is based on God’s law and wisdom. It promises a time of salvation to the poor, hope for the needy who have no help, to those who are weak with no one to take pity on them. When we take care of those infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, when we come to the help of orphans, parents distressed by having to leave their children behind and the grandmothers who carry burdens proper to a younger generation, we do it in God’s name. Then as the psalmist says:

“Blessed be God, the Lord, [...] who does wondrous things.
Blessed be his glorious name for ever; may his glory fill the
whole earth! Amen and Amen” (*Ps 72:18-19 cfr RSV*).

PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL

- P. Stir us up, O Lord, to make us ready for your only begotten Son.
May we be able to serve you in those who need your mercy and compassion.
Listen to our prayers on their behalf.
1. We pray for all those who work for Justice and Peace
Lord grant strength, courage and perseverance to all those who seek to redress unjust situation and exploitation. May they continue to plead the cause of those unable to access assistance. Let their voice be heard as they speak for the poor, for women and children and all who are vulnerable. **Lord hear us.**
 2. We pray for those who care for sick
We thank you, Lord, for the many Good Samaritans, who care for those ill with AIDS. Give them your Spirit of loving kindness that they bring dignity and comfort to those they serve. Strengthen and comfort them as they share the burdens and sorrows of others. **Lord hear us.**
 3. We pray for all Parish and Deanery HIV/AIDS Coordinators
Give your Spirit of Wisdom to those who are guiding the response of the archdiocese to HIV/AIDS. Help them to awaken all in the parish to a full awareness of the urgency of the response and to mobilise all without exception to play their full part. **Lord hear us.**
 4. We pray for our young parishioners
Lord, may our families develop their capacity for guiding their children. May they search for ways to educate and guide them especially by their example and openness to dialogue. Enlighten our parish to find ways of bringing young people together where they can help one another to mature as good Christians and upright and productive citizens. **Lord hear us.**
 5. We pray for our Parish
Bless all who welcome, support, befriend; all who respect and value the dignity of fellow human beings; all who take action on their behalf. God of love, God of faith, save us and help us. **Lord hear us.**
 6. *(Other intentions may be added, especially for HIV/AIDS initiatives already taking place in the Parish)*
- P. Father in heaven,
the day draws near when the glory of your Son
will make radiant the night of the waiting world.
May the lure of greed not impede us from the joy
which move the hearts of those who seek him.
May the darkness not blind us to the vision of wisdom
which fills the minds of those who find him.
We make our prayer through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Third Sunday in Advent Year A

HOMILY

This Sunday is called *Gaudete* Sunday, Rejoicing Sunday, because that is the call the Church makes to us using the words of St Paul in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians: *Gaudete in Domino*: “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.” At first glance it may seem inopportune to speak again about such a gloomy subject as HIV/AIDS on a Sunday which has an urgent invitation to be joyful! However, the gospel deals with the sad plight of lepers who appealed to Jesus to heal them and allow them to rejoin their loved ones and take their part in the life of the community. For those who have been cut off from society by the stigma attached to AIDS, the message of Jesus to those similarly ostracised by HIV/AIDS is one of hope and joy. John the Baptist had asked: “Have we got to wait for someone else?” and Jesus replied: “Tell John what you hear and see [...] the lepers are cleansed [...] happy is the one who does not lose faith in me!”

The apostle James has words of encouragement for those who are in distress: “Be patient until the Lord’s coming. [...] Do not lose heart because the Lord’s coming will be soon.”

The chances are that many of you are already aware of someone who is HIV+ or is suffering from AIDS. Perhaps you have already found ways to help. If so, and especially if it is someone not a close relative, you have taken on that blessed role of what Pope John Paul called being a Good Samaritan. When the bishops of Africa pledged the resources and structures of the Church to combating HIV/AIDS they realised that it has to be a joint effort. Only when a parish gets together to plan and carried out its initiative can we hope to see the real strength of the Church to bring Good News to the downcast and heal the sick. It is in this close cooperation that God’s healing power can become visible. We are the ones who allay the fears of those afflicted, ease their fears for their children and those they might leave behind. The parish has those who can assist in the process of getting government benefits for orphans. It is us who can help them to obtain treatment for a new lease of life and for many the effect of Anti Retroviral Treatment is remarkable, enabling people to continue living productive lives caring for their family.

Jesus singles out lepers as those he has healed and places it in conjunction with raising the dead to life. As we have seen, this healing is not just of sickness but of restoration to the life of society. By improving our understanding of HIV/AIDS can help us with our fears which makes us shun all contact with those affected. A hug is perhaps all that is needed to bring a healing of spirit.

Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta has set an example for our generation of zeal to comfort and give dignity to the poorest and most outcast of society. It is an example our parish cannot fail to take to heart in the present pandemic.

Hospitals and Hospices are not able to cater for everyone suffering from AIDS. Only a few can afford the specialised facilities of the medical industry. The cultural generosity of African society has welcomed the initiative of Home Based Care. Those who have responded in this way need considerable support. They still have to fulfil their family responsibilities. They require medical kits and equipment for their task. In such an emotionally difficult task of caring not only for a sick person but to offer support to the affected members of the family, Carers need support as well.

The archdiocese already has a well organised programme at Department level but it does need much more support from our parish and the deanery to which we belong. Our own parish HIV/AIDS Coordinator and team must have the involved support and assistance of all parishioners in order to make a marked difference to our parish.

“The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light” (*Isaiah 9:1*). The Ethiopian bishops, reflecting on this Advent theme from Isaiah, had this to tell their faithful people: These words of Isaiah remind us, especially those who suffer from illness, of the transformative power of Jesus Christ in the face of great hardship. Our pastoral responses are motivated by the hope that they may know the healing, peace and reconciliation of Christ, who came not to condemn the world but to save it (*cf. John 12:47*). In a similar way we remind all [...] of the great invitation issued by St Paul to “Live as children of light, for light produces every kind of goodness and righteousness and truth. Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness” (*Eph. 5:8*). Let these two points of light, representing hope in distress and fulfilling behaviour, shine as one, indistinguishable, for all to see. In this way, we will serve as witnesses to Christ and his gospel, faithfully observing his command: “As I have loved you, so you should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (*John 13:34*).

*[Pastoral Letter of the Ethiopian Bishops on HIV/AIDS:
“Love as our main tool of resistance to HIV/AIDS”- 2006]*

It is, therefore, with hope and joy that we pray in the words of today’s responsorial psalm:

Come Lord and Save us!

The Lord who keeps faith for ever
The Lord who raises up those who are bowed down
The Lord who upholds the orphans
The Lord who loves the just

Come Lord and save us!

PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL

P. P. O Lord, lighten the darkness of our minds and hearts. Lean down from heaven and hear the prayers we make to you for healing and restoration

1. Lord, we pray for all those deprived of their dignity and the fullness of life

Listen to our earnest prayer for families cut off from the ordinary joys of life through the chronic illness of one of their members, through abject poverty arising from the loss of the bread winner. Have pity on all bereaved by the loss of a loved one to AIDS, the young who lose the love and affection of a parent and hopes of a good education and start in life. **Lord hear us.**

2. We pray for all involved in medical care and research

Look with kindness on those who bring compassion, comfort and healing care to those suffering from AIDS. Give your enlightenment to all who work to find remedies for those who suffer. **Lord hear us.**

3. We pray for those burdened by being affected with HIV/AIDS

Have pity on those who find their situation absolutely overwhelming and their suffering, anxiety and grief unbearable. Help them to draw strength and hope from your love and the redemptive sufferings of Jesus Christ. **Lord hear us.**

4. We pray about our concern over the false messages and attitudes prevalent today

Be pleased to guide your Church to give witness to the truth and find ways to combat the damage being done by the media and our lack of discernment in its use.

5. We pray for our cherished teenagers and young adults who are not infected

Enable young people with your wisdom, Lord. Let them grasp their inherent dignity and infinite worth as persons made in the likeness of God. May our families and parish support them in the adventure of learning the meaning of true love and valuing the gift of sexuality within marriage and help them in their pursuit of chastity. May our example show them that the strength of future married love depends on their present effort to learn about true love.

6. *[Other intentions may be added at this point]*

P. Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, ever faithful to your promises and ever close to your Church; the earth rejoices in hope of the Saviour's coming.

Prepare our hearts and remove the sadness, fear and weakness that hinder us from feeling the joy and hope which his presence will give us.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.