

Welcome, everyone, as we come together to offer our worship. I especially welcome any visitors we have with us here today. Thank you for being here, your presence is a blessing for all of us.

Today, we begin the season of Advent. This is a season of joyful expectation, a season of hope and a season of preparation. That is our task in these next four weeks before Christmas – to focus on our preparation for the coming of the Lord.

Now notice our focus is not on preparing for Christmas. In Advent, we remind ourselves to prepare for the day when Christ will return, that day when all evil and suffering will be gone forever. No one knows when that day will be, and so no one knows when our preparation will end. But just as he came to earth when he was born of the Virgin Mary and died on the cross to save us from our sins, so will he come to earth again in glory, and this time wipe away even the *effects* of our sins, so that we will be with him in heaven forever. That is the focus of our preparation, we want to be ready when Christ comes in glory.

Such preparation requires focus, which can be especially difficult in this time before Christmas. This is the season of parties and shopping and travel. It's a season of cramming for final exams and finishing papers. It's a season of tournaments and recitals and performances. In today's gospel, our Lord didn't have this culture in mind, but it couldn't apply any better if he had: "beware that your

hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life.” That is the perfect gospel for us to hear today, because that is exactly the temptation that we face during this season, to allow the complexity and busyness of life to distract us and make our hearts drowsy, ill-prepared for the return of the Lord.

To overcome this, we need to take a step back and find a way to simplify our lives, especially during this time. The value of simplicity has been preached in the Catholic Church from the beginning, from Christ to the apostles to the Church fathers until now, but it’s even recognized in the secular world as our culture realizes the destructiveness of being pulled in a hundred different directions at once, which is no surprise. Simplicity is very attractive, because simplicity is freedom. Freedom from being burdened by life. Freedom from distraction. No one wants their lives to be so busy that they can barely think. We want simplicity, so that we can focus on what is most important, and not neglect it because we were distracted by so many other things. How do we do that? What does it mean to simplify our lives?

The first step in simplifying our lives is to recognize what is most important. What is essential, what must not be neglected for the sake of other things? To answer that, we turn to Scripture and come back to the point of today’s gospel: prepare the

way of the Lord; be ready for the return of Jesus Christ. There is nothing more important than our relationship with God and our preparation for the day when we stand before him face to face. We do not want to be in a position where we could say we got everything done on our list this Advent season except one: we're not prepared for Christ to return. That would mean our priorities were not in the proper order.

So the first step is identifying that being prepared for Christ is what is essential, and the next step is discerning how to do that. How do we prepare for Christ's return? One important way is by coming to him and repenting of our sins. It is not a coincidence that in this season of preparation, almost every parish increases their opportunities for confession and celebrates a penance service or two. We have one this Thursday evening at St. John campus with five priests to hear confessions, and I'll also be in the confessional during the week before our daily Mass. I enjoy celebrating confession with those who come regularly, but as I've mentioned before, what I really love is when someone comes up and says it's been many years since their last confession, sometimes thirty, forty years. The Church rejoices when someone comes back to the sacrament after a long absence, so if that's you, don't think that because you've been away for so long that now you can't go. Exactly the opposite. You're the one I'm most excited to see. Let us rejoice

together at the forgiveness of your sins. I encourage everyone: come to confession sometime during these next four weeks. You will not regret it.

Another way we prepare for Christ's return is by following his commandments. To prepare for Christ, we make sure not to neglect spending time in prayer every day.

We make sure not to neglect the hungry, the lonely, the sick, or the stranger. We do our best to act with love towards all those around us: our family, our friends, our coworkers, our in-laws, our former in-laws – everyone. Confessing our sins and following Christ's commandments: that is good preparation for the return of our Lord.

Now this takes time, and time is something we only have so much of, so to make sure we have time to do these things will likely mean dropping other things. You don't have to apologize for saying "no" to some things. Trying to meet everyone's expectations of what we will do and where we will be during is what often times complicates our life to the point where we can't focus. We do what we can with the time we have, recognizing that preparing for Christ is our top priority.

Perhaps a helpful way to look at this time of preparation is to consider how you would spend the next four weeks if you knew with certainty that Christ would return at the end of the year. That would certainly provide some focus, some clarity on what is most important. We could have a big countdown clock in the church as

the day approached. What is out of order that you would be desperate to get into proper order before he arrived? If you would do what you were going to do anyway, that must mean you are prepared. If you would make some changes, then you have a blueprint of how to spend this season of Advent.

Christ is on his way. He really is, the date is on the calendar, we just don't know what date it is. It really could be tonight, so we want to be prepared. Let us spend this season of Advent focusing on what is most important, so that we are ready for the coming of our Lord.