Reflection for the First Sunday of Advent

The season of Advent is a very ancient one, known to be in existence from around 480AD. The word *"Advent"* is a Latin word which translates as *"coming"* and Advent was always a season that looked forward to something else – to a coming. It is a season intimately linked with what happens next, a season of preparation.

However, in the beginning, different parts of the Church were looking forward to different things. Some parts of the Church were looking forward to the second coming of Christ in all his glory, to judge the living and the dead. This event is sometimes known by its Greek name, the *Parousia.* Other parts of the Church were commemorating the time when the people of Israel were waiting for the coming of their Messiah, the Saviour, and so it was a time of preparation to celebrate the birth of Jesus. And the length of the Advent season varied greatly. In some parts of the Church Advent ran for forty days just like Lent, in others it ran for a shorter period starting in the month of December. Like Lent, Advent could be a very austere and penitential season with prayer, fasting and penance. There were differences also in the Eastern part of the Church where this season was not known as *"Advent"* but as the *"Nativity Fast"* and it wasn't seen, as we in the Western or Latin Church see it, as the start of the Church's liturgical year.

In time these different traditions were brought together and eventually Advent was seen as preparing both for Christ's second coming at the end of time and for his original coming in the first Christmas in Bethlehem. Nowadays Advent runs for a variable period of time incorporating the four Sundays before Christmas day and it has two clear parts to it. The first part up to December 16th looks forward to Christ's return in glory and the prayers, preface and readings during that time have that theme. So, our opening prayer at Mass today reads: *"Grant your faithful the resolve….to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming."* And the preface at Mass speaks of *"when he comes again in glory and majesty and all is at last made manifest, we who watch for that day may inherit the great promise in which we now dare to hope."* The second part of Advent from 17th December prepares more directly to celebrate the birth in time of our Saviour and we hear the stories of the events which preceded his birth – the Annunciation, the birth of John the Baptist, Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, the journey to Bethlehem etc.

In summary Advent is about looking forward to, and preparing for, the two comings of Christ. It is a season which cries out for our engagement and commitment, which cries out to us to open our hearts in welcome and embrace. So, in the words of Jesus from today's gospel: *"Stay awake - for you do not know when the Master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or in the morning - lest he come suddenly, and find you asleep."*