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# Those Who Watch for Christ

## Biblical Reflection for 1st Sunday of Advent C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, NOV. 24, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Every now and then when the world seems to be falling apart and problems appear to be insurmountable, I recall with gratitude the heroes of the Velvet Revolution who helped to bring down the reign of Communism 20 years ago. I cherish the words of hope of former Czech President Vaclav Havel, during his days of imprisonment.

Those words captivated the imagination of many people as we witnessed the Communist regime finally come to an end: "The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

"In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts is something we get, as it were, from 'elsewhere'."

I also turn frequently to the Catechism of the Catholic Church's section on the theological virtues and read the paragraphs on hope (Nos. 1817-1821). I always find hope and peace of mind and heart from those paragraphs on hope. I have been particularly struck by the thoughts found in the Catechism (No. 1818):

"The virtue of hope responds to the aspiration to happiness which God has placed in the heart of every man; it takes up the hopes that inspire men's activities and purifies them so as to order them to the Kingdom of heaven; it keeps man from discouragement; it sustains him during times of abandonment; it opens up his heart in expectation of eternal beatitude. Buoyed up by hope, he is preserved from selfishness and led to the happiness that flows from charity."

### Day-to-day following of Jesus

Such thoughts are important for us as we enter the season of Advent with a bang this year -- with a section from Luke's chapter on the end times! In today's Gospel story (21:25-28; 34-36), we can see, hear and feel Jesus' eschatological discourse in Mark 13. The actual destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in A.D. 70 upon which Luke and his community look back (Luke 21:20-24) provides the assurance that, just as Jesus' prediction of Jerusalem's destruction was fulfilled, so too will be his announcement of their final redemption (21:27-28).

The Evangelist Luke has made some significant alterations to Mark's description of the end times. Luke maintains the belief in the early expectation of the end of the age but, by focusing attention throughout the gospel on the importance of the day-to-day following of Jesus and by reinterpreting the meaning of some of the signs of the end from Mark 13, he has come to terms with what seemed to the early Christian community

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to be a delay of the Parousia (Second Coming). In dealing with the persecution of the disciples (21:12-19) and the destruction of Jerusalem (21:20-24) Luke is pointing to eschatological signs that have already been fulfilled.

The central message of Christianity does not consist in knowing the exact details of the end of the world. As a matter of fact, there are very few specifics about the future in Jesus' preaching other than that God is going to accomplish his purpose and he's going to accomplish it through Jesus. When my students would ask me about the Second Coming, I always tell them that I suspect it's going to be as big a surprise as the first coming was. It is in God's hands. God will bring about his Kingdom and that is what is most important.

### Blameless in holiness

In the second reading from St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (3:12-4:2) we encounter Paul trying to strengthen his Thessalonian converts in their new faith about 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. For Paul, an essential part of the Christian message was the Parousia, or the Second Coming. Without that event, the drama of salvation was incomplete. Paul believed the Parousia was imminent, but preparation was required. Paul asked two things: (1) an increase in mutual and universal love and (2) the attainment of the Christian goal. The goal was holiness expressed in loving concern for one another. Holiness would be achieved through daily, ordinary acts of goodness, kindness, charity and hope.

### Wake-up call

Advent confronts us and wakes us from our stupor. What is the work of Advent for each of us this year? We are invited to quietly prepare our hearts and our lives for the coming of the ever-greater one in the flesh. For what or for whom are we waiting in life? What virtues or gifts are we praying to receive this year? What material things do we seek? The people, qualities, things we await give us great insights into who we are. Advent, far from being a penitential time or a time of despair, is a time of rejoicing in hope and a time of patient waiting. God knows how impatient we are as a people and as individuals. Nevertheless, patience is a blessed virtue for which we should pray during Advent.

Long ago St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote that almost everything about our Lord Jesus Christ is twofold. "He has two births: one from God before the ages, the other from the Virgin at the end of all ages. He has two comings: the one is hidden and resembles the falling of the dew upon a fleece; the other -- the future one -- on the contrary will be manifest.

"At his first coming, he was wrapped in linens and laid in a manger; at the second, light shall be his robe. In the first coming he endured the cross -- heedless of its shame; in his second coming he will be in glory surrounded by an army of angels.

"Let us therefore not stop at his first coming but look forward to the second. We hailed him at his first coming with the words, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' And we shall hail him in the same way at his second coming. For we shall go out to meet the Lord and his angels, and, prostrating ourselves before him, we shall cry, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

As Christians, we proclaim the coming of Christ -- not just a first coming but another as well that will be far more glorious than the first. The first took place under the sign of patient suffering; the second, on the contrary, will see Christ wearing the crown of God's Kingdom.

Advent teaches us that there are two ways of looking at history: one is sociological and the other is religious. The first, *chronos*, is essentially unredeemed and cyclic. The second, *xairos*, is redeemed by God in Christ Jesus and becomes the possibility of providence and sacrament.

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Let me leave you with some reflections on hope as we enter this most blessed season of patient longing and joyful expectation of the Lord Jesus. First, a wonderful section of the Parochial and Plain Sermons of Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman, whose beatification we will finally celebrate in the New Year:

"They watch for Christ who are sensitive, eager, apprehensive in mind,  
Who are awake, alive, quick-sighted, zealous in honoring him,  
Who look for him in all that happens,  
And who would not be surprised,  
Who would not be over-agitated or overwhelmed,  
If they found that he was coming at once.

"This then is to watch: to be detached from what is present,  
And to live in what is unseen;  
To live in the thought of Christ as he came once,  
And as he will come again; to desire his second coming,  
From our affectionate and grateful remembrance of his first."

Finally, this moving reflection on hope by the late Fr. James Keller, M.M., Founder of The Christophers:

"Hope looks for the good in people instead of harping on the worst.  
Hope opens doors where despair closes them.

"Hope discovers what can be done instead of grumbling about what cannot.  
Hope draws its power from a deep trust in God and the basic goodness of human nature.

"Hope 'lights a candle' instead of 'cursing the darkness.'  
Hope regards problems, small or large, as opportunities.

"Hope cherishes no illusions, nor does it yield to cynicism.  
Hope sets big goals and is not frustrated by repeated difficulties or setbacks.

"Hope pushes ahead when it would be easy to quit.  
Hope puts up with modest gains, realizing that 'the longest journey starts with one step.'

"Hope accepts misunderstandings as the price for serving the greater good of others.  
Hope is a good loser because it has the divine assurance of final victory."

[The readings for the 1st Sunday of Advent are Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2; and Luke 21:25-28, 34-36]

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