

“John Martens is not only an excellent biblical scholar, he also has a pastor’s soul. These weekly reflections help us get inside the Scriptures each Sunday in a way that is scholarly, accessible, and spiritually rich. He makes the Word of God alive in so many thoughtful ways. This volume is a perfect synthesis of heart and mind, a place I can go to learn about the biblical readings for each week, be touched by God and grow spiritually. I enthusiastically recommend *The Word on the Street* for all Christians, from thoughtful high school and college students to lay adults of all ages, and even (and especially) to theologians. Each reflection has something for everyone.”

— Peter Feldmeier, Murray/Bacik Endowed Professor of Catholic Studies,  
University of Toledo

“In a cultural environment where religion is often used to enhance one’s identity, John Martens’ *The Word on the Street* is a good example of what Pope Francis called ‘theology on one’s knees.’ Doing theology begins with Scripture and worship: in this sense, a book of Sunday reflections for the liturgical year stands at the center, at the beginning, and the end of what nurtures the Christian experience, beyond the different liturgical and political commitments that divide the Church today. But John Martens’ book is far from indifferent to the meaning of Scripture for the life of Christians in the world of today.”

— Massimo Faggioli, professor of theology and religious studies at  
Villanova University (Philadelphia)



# THE WORD ON THE STREET

Year A

*Sunday Lectionary Reflections*

JOHN W. MARTENS



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# Preface

For those who read the Bible as the word of God, it is a properly daunting task to write on the Scripture. God's word has been given to us for our salvation, to allow us to order our lives properly and to grow in holiness, which is to grow to be more and more like God. As the apostle Paul urged the Thessalonians, "we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more" (1 Thess 4:1). That is, to grow in holiness is a continuing process and so, too, is reading and understanding the Bible. It is a task that is never finished, in which new insights and developments continue to emerge. To be able to speak authoritatively on the Scripture, therefore, ought not to be an act of hubris, but an act of humility, reflection, and prayer in which God is allowed to speak to us and direct us.

The writings you find here are mostly the products of a weekly process in which I spent time thinking about and praying with the readings for each Sunday, and pondering the things of my life, both ordinary and extraordinary, as I constructed my columns for *America* magazine's The Word and then returned to them and revised each of them as I prepared this book. A number of reflections, thirteen in total, have also been prepared specifically for this edition and have not appeared in *America* previously. The same processes, however, lie behind these writings.

It is a humbling task not just because I am writing on Scripture, but because I am aware of how many people have read the columns and will read this book, hoping to gain spiritual guidance, sustenance, and inspiration, and how many great scholars have written the column for *America* magazine in the previous years and decades. But then one adds to this the fact that some of the greatest minds ever have been writing on Scripture throughout the ages, such as St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas . . . and it is enough to make you throw down your quill (or keyboard) and wonder what you have to add.

And at this point, Scripture comes to our aid once again. You realize that the Bible is written for every age and it needs to be heard anew by every person and that task will fall on some of us in every era. Paul claimed that he was "the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle,

because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain" (1 Cor 15:9-10). I am not comparing myself to Paul, but I am suggesting that each of us has a call that, even when we feel unworthy of it, God gives us the ability to fulfill. Paul went on to say that "I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Cor 15:10). I cannot say that I worked harder than anyone, but I can say that these columns emerge from my long training in biblical studies, my desire to grasp God's word, and my willingness to sit with the Bible, in English, Greek, and Hebrew, and to deliberate over each word, in order to answer a call I was not certain I was capable of fulfilling. More and more, I realize it is God's grace that enables the hard work and the skills that I claim as my own.

It is here, too, where I must thank my colleagues at *America* magazine, especially James Martin, SJ, Matt Malone, SJ, Bob Collins, SJ, Tim Reidy, Kerry Weber, and many others, who persevered in order to give me the opportunity to write the column, and who continue to encourage me along the way and do the hard work of editing my columns every week. They have allowed me the freedom to write on Scripture in whatever context emerges for that week and have given me unfailing support on whatever path I have chosen. In the same way, I wish to thank my editors at Liturgical Press for giving me this opportunity and shepherding it from start to finish with such professional care.

I also must thank my parents, John and Gertrude Martens, for instilling in me a great love of Scripture, which was cemented in the Mennonite church in which I grew up and by a large extended family on both my mother's and father's sides of the family. I grew up in an environment thoroughly drenched in Scripture, which was not seen as a dead letter but as a living word that had been enacted, for instance, in bringing my family from the horrors of Stalinist Soviet Union to the refugee camps of post-World War II Europe and then to Canada. They did not and do not see these events as accidental, but as signs of God's providence. This is how they continue to read and interpret the Bible: it impacts our day-to-day lives and makes sense of them, giving them meaning and purpose.

Real interpretation of Scripture takes place at the ground level, in how we live our lives, and no one has helped me shape my interpretation of Scripture more than my own family—Tabitha, Sam, and Jake—who have aided me not just to think and to write about the Bible, but have challenged me to live out the Scripture every day, at street level.

Finally, however, I wish to thank all of you, the readers, who have sent numerous emails and handwritten letters (yes, readers send handwritten

letters in envelopes still!) to encourage and support me every week. It is for the readers that this book is titled *The Word on the Street*. It is not intended to indicate a kind of hip knowingness about the ways of the world, but to indicate that Scripture is intended to speak to us where we live—whether the street, the suburbs, refugee camps, the big city, or the farm—and to meet us in our daily lives. Wherever you are and whatever stage of life you are in, God has something to say to you through the word of God. I am thankful that I can participate in this work and thank God for allowing this opportunity to speak with you. I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I have enjoyed writing it and I hope this book enables you to encounter God, the source of all true joy, in Scripture and on the street, as you go about your lives ordinary and extraordinary, certain in the knowledge that God is with you.

John W. Martens

December 8, 2015,  
Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
Opening of the Holy Year of Mercy



# WASTIN' TIME?

## First Sunday of Advent

*Readings:* Isa 2:1-5; Ps 122:1-2, 3-4, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9;  
Rom 13:11-14; Matt 24:37-44

*"Therefore you also must be ready." (Matt 24:44)*

There is a bittersweet gentleness to Otis Redding's classic song "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay," as the singer looks homeward to Georgia while "wastin' time" on the San Francisco docks. Everyone has experienced a longing for home, whether as a child at summer camp, as a student away at university, or as someone separated from home for more somber reasons—as a refugee, for example, or an economic emigrant. And everyone has had to process that longing, sometimes by whiling away the time, thinking about home or doing nothing at all. But if one gets caught in this mode for too long, the longing for home can become overwhelming and drive a person to despair or hopelessness.

This is the spiritual warning that Redding's song brings to mind during Advent. Our true spiritual home is calling all of us—which means that wherever we are, we all feel that twinge of longing at one time or another. But that longing cannot be allowed to devolve into hopelessness by drawing our focus away from the life we are leading now. Thinking about our eternal home is necessary, but this life is not intended to be a way of just "wastin' time" while we wait.

When we read the prophet Isaiah, though, it is no wonder that we contemplate our future home, imagining the time when God, the king of all peoples, invites us to "the mountain of the LORD's house" and "all the nations shall stream to it." It is a time when "out of Zion shall go forth instruction [Torah], and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem." This instruction leads to a new ethic among the nations, which, Isaiah says, will "beat their swords into plowshares, / and their spears into pruning hooks; / nation shall not lift up sword against nation, / neither shall they learn war any more." How does one not spend some time reflecting on and waiting for this glorious time?

Jesus and Paul, however, warn us that the time of Advent is also to be a time of preparation. Paul says, "It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." This armor is protection against "reveling and drunkenness . . . debauchery and licentiousness . . . quarreling and jealousy." Paul speaks of Christians not gratifying "the flesh," by which he means not bodily desires specifically, but all that pulls us away from God's desires for us.

Even the goods of this world can draw us away from God as they tantalize us by their very goodness, but that, when loved out of order, lead us to desire the creations instead of the Creator. It is for this reason that Jesus warns us even about things that in proper order and in proper place give great joy and meaning to life, but that out of order can distract us from the greatest good, God. Jesus, therefore, draws an analogy between "the days of Noah" and "the coming of the Son of Man." In the time of Noah, "before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark." Food, drink, and a wedding—good things indeed; but in Jesus' telling, these good things blinded them to the flood, which "swept them all away."

Jesus says that the "coming of the Son of Man" presents us with an analogous situation. It is not a situation, as some read today's gospel passage, concerning the "Rapture"—a concept wholly unattested in Scripture, by which certain Christians are plucked from this world as a means of bypassing time, escaping from this world—but rather of proper preparation for God's arrival. It is preparation that requires a proper use of time. This time, now, is not the time to despair and to forget that God is calling you home, "wastin' time" by forgetting that there is an eternal home or turning away from God's coming judgment by trying to forget the true home through forms of escapism, whether material or spiritual. Preparation for the arrival of the Lord determines who is ready to go home when called. What time is it? Time to get ready, "for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."



Reflect on Jesus' return and your eternal home. In what way do you experience the longing for home? How are you preparing to go home?

# THE COMING OF THE KING

## Second Sunday of Advent

*Readings:* Isa 11:1-10; Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17;  
Rom 15:4-9; Matt 3:1-12

*“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you.”*  
(Rom 15:7)

The Greek word that refers to Jesus’ arrival, most often translated as “second coming,” is *Parousia*. The term was adopted by Christians from the common Greek usage and imperial Roman ideology of the day, in which a city prepared for and eagerly anticipated the arrival of a major political personage. This ancient data became known among students of the Bible through the groundbreaking study of ancient Hellenistic papyri by Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, published a century ago. If the arrival was that of the Roman emperor, the preparation of the city and the people would be magnificent and fitting for a person of such rank. Preparation would be made for great feasts, and all the leading citizens of the city would be arrayed in their finest to meet the emperor. It was a matter of great importance.

*Adventus* is the Latin equivalent of *Parousia*. Advent is for Christians a similar process of anticipation and waiting, but it must also be a time of preparation. How do we prepare for the coming of the King? In Romans 15:2 Paul asks the Christians in Rome to seek the good of their brothers and sisters, writing that “each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.” The church in Rome in the first century exhibited divisions between Jewish and Gentile Christians and the “strong” and the “weak,” and Paul instructs the church to imitate Christ, who “did not please himself.”

Paul prays for the Romans that “the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to think in harmony with one another, in keeping with Christ Jesus” (NABRE). The New American Bible translation, cited above, captures best the meaning of the verb *phroneō* in this context as referring

to the need of the Roman Christians to “be of the same mind” or to “think harmoniously.” To prepare for the coming of our King, it is essential to seek harmony.

Christians today exhibit various divisions that mimic those of Paul’s ancient church. Our divisions are between those of different liturgical or political commitments, not between Jew and Gentile; but they threaten our ability to “be of the same mind” or to “think harmoniously” as we prepare to welcome Christ. Yet we await and prepare for the Parousia of the same King, the source of harmony. Paul’s call that we “welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” is not a simple proposal or suggestion, but the way of life that ought to set Christians apart as we prepare for Christ’s arrival. It is our task to prepare for the coming of Christ by inviting all into the kingdom, by making room in the house for those once excluded, and that certainly includes our brothers and sisters from whom we might feel estranged or excluded.

Isaiah foresees the time after the arrival of the king, after the Parousia, when the king has judged the poor with righteousness and “with equity for the meek of the earth.” This will be a time when harmony resonates through all creation, inaugurating a kingdom in which “the wolf shall live with the lamb, / the leopard shall lie down with the kid, / the calf and the lion and the fatling together, / and a little child shall lead them.” At root, this kingdom destroys expectations that life in creation must be “red of tooth and claw” and offers a new way of living together. Isaiah says we “will be full of the knowledge of the LORD / as the waters cover the sea. . . . On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; / the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.”

Harmony in the household of God is preparation for the kingdom, and our duty begins now. For there was another aspect of the Parousia found in the Roman Empire. The New Testament scholar Brent Kinman asked, “What would happen if the customary greeting were not extended?”<sup>†</sup> He answers that it happened rarely because of the dire repercussions, but on one occasion when it happened, the Roman magistrate in question besieged the city “because it did not receive him properly.” Our ability to welcome each other in harmony is a necessary preparation for welcoming Jesus at his Parousia.





Imagine Jesus' arrival in your city today. How would you want to welcome him? What do you consider a proper welcome? How can you work to create harmony in the household of God?

† Brent Kinman, "Parousia, Jesus' 'A-Triumphal' Entry, and the Fate of Jerusalem (Luke 19:28-44)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118 (1999): 283.