The word Advent in the sense of a coming or an arrival can be applied to a host of things, from the advent of a new government to that of a more sophisticated technology.

In the context of the liturgy and of the church calendar, the word Advent refers to the coming of Christ. Today’s second reading as well as the gospel speak of his future coming, of his coming at the end of time.

Christianity was born in a period when many Jews were looking forward with a mixture of trepidation and of expectation to what they called the Day of the Lord, a day of judgment as well as a day of salvation.

That same kind of expectation, only now applied to Christ, was very much alive among the first Christians. They had a sense of living in the between time, the time between the past and the future, between the saving event of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and its future fulfillment when Christ would return and usher in the Kingdom of God in all its fullness.

Today’s reading from the letter to the Romans bears witness to the extent to which this expectation of the end time and of the return of Christ was very much alive for St Paul. Because he hoped and believed that his return would soon take place, he encouraged believers in the churches, which his preaching had called into existence to look forward to, and to prepare for it. In the present text, the apostle plays with the images of night and day and of darkness and light. “The night is far gone,” he says, “the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.”

If Advent is a period of expectation, even of longing for the coming of Christ, it is also a period during which we are called to prepare ourselves to welcome him when he comes.

The last two verses of today’s reading from Romans played a crucial role in the conversion of St Augustine. Torn for some time between the life that he had been living and the possibility of a new life in Christ, Augustine, almost in desperation, picked up a copy of Paul’s letters, opened it and began to read the text, which we heard read a few moments ago. “Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy … but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. Because Augustine had been moving slowly toward this moment, Paul’s text had a decisive impact on him. It enabled him to overcome his wavering and to embrace the gift that was being offered to him in Christ. The struggle that Augustine went through during those last months leading up to his conversion were a true Advent experience.

The liturgy celebrates a threefold coming of Christ – his coming some two thousand years ago in the life and destiny of Jesus, his future coming in glory at the end of time and his coming here and now into our lives and into the life of the world.

Although we talk at times as if Christ comes and goes, that is not the case. He is always coming, always inviting us into a deeper relationship with him, always offering compassion and mercy, forgiveness and life to those who turn to him and who open themselves to his gifts. Whether we are thinking of God or of the risen Christ, our God is a God who comes. What is asked of us is that we be open to his coming and welcome him when he comes.

Advent as a season of the liturgical year celebrates what might be called a permanent dimension of human life. To foster our humanity we need moments of reflection as well as a willingness to deepen our relation with God. That relationship is mainly built on two things – the way we act, especially the way we treat one another, and prayer.

Advent prayer is above all prayer for the coming of Christ to us and our families and to a world that is unable to free itself from war and violence as well as from hunger and oppression. The prayer of Advent is a prayer of longing and expectation, a prayer of hope. Such prayer does not require many words. What it does require is some time of inner quiet and attentiveness. It may only last a few moments, but in those moments we can encounter Christ who in his Spirit is present in us. We invite him to come, not because he is not with us but because we are not with him.

The final verse of the book of Revelation, the last book in the New Testament, ends with a classic Advent prayer, “Come Lord Jesus, come.”