

I like Advent. It feels as if it really is the beginning of the holiday energy. But, as somewhat traditional and catholic Christians, we aren't to start celebrating Christmas quite yet. Advent is a season of preparation; we are encouraged to restrain our celebrations for a little while. This is difficult considering that the majority of people in this country are going full steam ahead into holiday festivities. Yet these festivities miss an important reality – that is the reality of contrast. When one goes from party to party to party, everything tends to run together. There is no distinction in our experience. Besides that, everyone of us experience the sadness of life sometime, and it is important to recognize both the joy and sadness of life through the Church calendar. There is a time for joy and mirth. There is a time for mourning and brokenness. And in this life, we go through all of it. Thus when a person constantly seeks out the party, his sense of reality becomes distorted, and ultimately he suffers existential depression because the party can't be perpetually great. Change and distinction are vital to us human beings.

Thus, Advent: the time in which we prepare for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. But what does this really mean? Is this merely some abstract preparation for some abstract coming? Dr. Robert Crouse, referring to St. Thomas Aquinas, notes that in Advent, Jesus comes to us in three dimensions. These are:

... the coming of the Son of God *in carne*: in the flesh, historically; his coming *in mente*: in our souls, now by grace; and *ad judicium*: at the judgement, at the end and as the end of history.

Crouse continues:

Paramount in our Advent lessons is that second dimension: Christ's Advent *in mente*, the present coming of the Word of God in our souls by grace. If you were to look at the lessons from that standpoint, you would notice how in each case, the Epistle lesson underlines the present reference of the Gospel lesson.

So in Advent, we are aware of both the historic and apocalyptic Jesus. He came in the past in the incarnation. He will come again to judge both the quick and the dead. Both of these have parallels in our present individual lives. Christ has come to us, been given to us, in our past through baptism. Christ will judge us at the end of time, and by His unmerited grace our salvation will be completed and we shall be glorified like Him. In the meantime Christ comes to us moment by moment. He calls us to continual repentance and obedience so that we

might ever more grow in holiness. We daily put on Christ in our souls, which putting on manifests itself through our attitudes and actions.

In our gospel lesson today, we read of the Triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem. This seems an odd selection; wouldn't it be better on Palm Sunday? The point of this selection of scripture is that it emphasizes to us the Coming of Christ – not just as an historical reality, but as a picture of how Christ comes to each one of us. First, we may welcome Him to our souls with shouts of “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord!” But then we must do some soul work. Do we really intend to allow Jesus into every part of our soul? Or is the merely a pleasantry to soothe our consciences? We will let Christ into some parts of our hearts, but shut Him out of other areas that we want to keep for ourselves? Why is this? Of course, it's because we harbor thoughts and imaginations and deeds that do not honor Him, which we do not wish to let go of.

Yet Jesus will be Lord of All – all of the world and all of each heart. There are no parts of us that He will be content in not reigning over. To keep Him barred from our hearts is to lose out on His full love.

We see this in the story of Adam and Eve. Before their fall into sin, they were united in the bond of perfect unity, perfect love. They were naked and unashamed. They did not have to hide anything from each other because of the fear of rejection for there was nothing for which they would reject each other. They were completely visible to one another and, because they completely trusted each other, shame was unknown to them.

This is the relationship that God wants with us, in our Lord Jesus Christ by the power and unity of the Holy Spirit. If we shut out those areas of which we are ashamed from Him, then He can not extend the fullness of healing to us, and we cannot know the fullness of unity, the fullness of joy, with Him. On entering the city, Christ proceeds directly to the temple, the most sacred part, of our hearts. He takes stock of what He finds there and then cleans house – throwing out the avarice and covetousness and impurity of which we are so fond. There is to be only one Lord in this city, and that Lord will not share His reign with our pet sins. “It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.”

Advent then begins by asking us, “Will we welcome Christ into every part of our lives? Every part of our hearts? Will we let Him clear out and renovate them as He will?” We all

have besetting, habitual sins to which we are blind. Christ will come in and reveal these sins to us, and we must let Him. We have incurred moral debts that we fear to pay, that we are ashamed to face.

“Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for He that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.” So begins the epistle lesson today. As this passage continues, we are challenged with the primary theme of Advent. Our souls need to be cleaned out to become fit for Christ to take up residence, but we have become complacent and comfortable. We have become familiar with those besetting sins – we can manage them ok. Let's not rock the boat. But the epistle continues:

that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.

Advent is our spiritual kick in the head. The end of St. Mark chapter 13 reads,

For the Son of Man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch.

Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning:

Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping.

The judgement of Christ is coming, as surely as He comes to us in each moment of the day. And yet we are sleeping. “Now it is high time to awake out of sleep; The night is far spent, the day is at hand.” It is time to leave our sleep, our complacency, behind, and to recommit to a spiritual seriousness in our lives. Christ is coming. Be ye prepared.

And the language of this epistle is incorporated into the Advent collect which the prayer book instructs us to pray every day of Advent.

ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put

upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal,

So daily we are reminded to cast off our sins, for they are not harmless. They separate us from the love of God. They create a barrier to the joy of union with our Lord. Sin is serious. We must not condone it as a benign, rather cute, little tumor of which we have actually grown quite fond. No, sin is a life-threatening cancer that must be excised. Cast it away – cast far away the works of darkness.

Simultaneously, we daily pray to put on Jesus Christ. Focus upon Him and upon His love for you, so that you would better learn that union with Christ is the source of all true joy. We are not only fighting against sin, but we are also embracing the only thing that can genuinely satisfy our deepest longings. Advent shakes us out of sleep and reminds us that as The Lord Jesus comes to us continually, so therefore we actively flee from sin and embrace His grace, His presence.

Now these theological concepts are certainly important; they provide a framework for understanding what we are about in this season. But what does this mean practically for us? How do we incarnate these concepts? How do we embody them?

First, understand that a Christian lives in repentance – lives continually confessing the selfish desires that he has so that they may be removed, and lives continually seeking to be filled with Christ's righteousness – putting on the armor of light. During Advent therefore, spend time daily asking God to reveal your sins to you and then let Christ in. Confess them and receive the forgiveness of God. As your priest, I am available to hear confessions as well, which is a healthful and biblical minor sacrament and brings the freedom of absolution. Ask or email me if you have questions about this.

Along with this, other spiritual disciplines may also be helpful to set this time apart. Fasting from certain foods or ingredients such as sugar or wheat products or other types of intermittent fasting can be helpful to continually remind us of the season. If you do not currently say daily morning prayer, at least take a minute to say the Advent collect (pg 90 of the BCP or printed in the bulletin). Many people will also read Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* during Advent or read the book of the Prophet Isaiah during Advent, for of all the prophets,

Isaiah is the most messianic and is quoted the most by the New Testament authors. There are 66 chapters in Isaiah so this is a little over 2 ½ chapters a day. I also always recommend that you commit to coming to the church to pray the daily offices with us on Wednesday night at 7pm, and Thursday and Friday at 8:15 am and 4:45 pm. This is a foundational discipline for healthy and lively spiritual formation.

Now if this all sounds reminiscent of Lent – well, you wouldn't be far off. In the East, Advent is called the “Little Lent.” Both have a similar emphasis on spiritual disciplines. Lent prepares our hearts for the Risen Lord to come, while Advent prepares our hearts for the Righteous Judge and King to come. Lent ends in a sacrifice, a death, the bloodwork of a priest. Advent, however, ends in a birth, the bloodwork of a mother. Both usher in new life for us, the former through union, the later through propitiation and resurrection. Both are absolutely needed: first Christ was born for us and later gave Himself for us. The one does not happen without the other. He first took our human nature into Himself and then, through His death, raised it into the presence of the Father.

Now as time continues on unabated, we never really have a choice to avoid these seasons. We do have a choice of if or how we will honor them. So how will your Advent be this year? Will you carry on in the same way that you have been doing? Or will you embrace a change of habit, shaking yourself out of the trance of the everyday? Ready or not, Christ is coming. May we always be prepared to welcome Him, and when Christmas comes, may we eagerly raise our voices to proclaim, “Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.