

Advent 2016

Advent. What comes to mind at the mention of Advent? ... A reminder that the pre-Christmas rush is upon us? That we've only got days to find Advent calendars for the children? All those special events at school? A sense of joyful anticipation? or of foreboding? If you ask any non-churchgoers, I expect that, if anything at all, they'd think of Advent calendars – and chocolate behind the little doors. (How we corrupt our children!)

My first awareness of Advent was at boarding school. With obligatory Chapel daily, suddenly one Sunday it was different – not only the colour purple but a different mood: no Gloria, hymns somehow solemn and exciting at the same time; some dire warnings in some of the readings. And, as I'd learnt by the next year, Advent as exciting signal of the approaching end of term, and going home for Christmas. Forgive me if I've mentioned this before (not that you'd remember if I have!) – most memorable was the organist playing that wonderful piece of Bach, *Wachet Auf*. The light, dancing theme at first, and then the great chorale tune (you know, our hymn *Wake, O wake*, with tidings thrilling) solemn, low, full of portent. It still strikes me that this contrast vividly reflects the two-sided nature of Advent. On the one hand, the joyful anticipation of Christmas – whatever form that takes. On the other hand, a reminder of our mortality, as we look towards the Second Coming, and whether this will be welcome, or terrible judgement.

Let's start with that, then take a look at the other aspect. There's a long tradition of pondering the Last Things at this season, at the darkening and dying of the year. By convention, this is summed up as 'Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell'; and we are going to have short reflections on each at our Wednesday evening Mass during Advent. We're changing the order, starting with judgement and ending with heaven, not with hell. The earliest Christians expected an imminent return of Christ in glory, and for universal judgement. They'd learnt to revere him as Messiah, the longed-for Saviour who would put everything to rights. But after the Resurrection appearances stopped, after the Pentecost experience and the exciting growth of numbers of fellow-disciples – then what? The world was just as before. Even the Roman occupation continued and, before many years, their catastrophic destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem.

Looking back over the remembered (and half-remembered) teaching of Jesus, and words of the prophets before him, they deduced that the Messiah would return, in great power and glory, to finish his work and pass judgement on every human being. The rewards? In, or Out – eternal bliss, or everlasting lake of fire. No shades of grey. No wonder the promise of an imminent second coming aroused both joyful hope and sheer terror. About the *timing* of the End, they got it wildly wrong: 2,000 years is hardly imminent. Had they misunderstood the teaching of Jesus? He did warn of dire results if they continued debasing their faith and distorting the hoped-for Messiah into a military hero ('Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if only you had known...the way that leads to peace...') Some things never change!). Those warnings were made all too real in the destruction of AD 70.

But had some of *those* warnings been confused with fears of the end of the world as we know it? Or did Jesus himself really expect to return? His resurrection, after all, was indeed a return – wasn't that enough? Who knows, but some kind of judgement is inescapably part of the Biblical message, whenever and however it may be. There are some suggestions that in life we are, in a sense, judging ourselves already. And also that the over-arching lesson of Jesus's teaching, and the lesson of his life and actions even more, is to show God as God of love and mercy. Jesus forgave the paralyzed man's sins, and cured him, without demanding evidence of repentance or even a confession. Given his example, we all stand accountable

At the very least, Advent can prompt us to remember our own mortality; to be aware of the vulnerable, temporary nature of human life, of the natural world around us, of our buildings, our institutions, the internet, even of the earth itself; and to realise that 'here we have no abiding city.'

Secondly, and much more briefly, what about the Preparation-for-Christmas bit? Of course there is all the rush of getting presents, sending Christmas cards, sorting family arrangements (some potentially tricky); the special events, the office parties, and so on. It can be an adrenaline rush, a time of excitement, or a time of utter exhaustion; or loneliness. In some occupations, it is a time of extra pressure professionally, as well as all the family and other stuff (how I remember it!). The escalation of all this, especially the *scale* of present-giving, is a comparatively recent thing; and maybe we should try to gently wind it down, to recover some of the simplicity of the original.

Advent was once a time for fasting and prayer: not much sign of that now. Yet, however hard it is, if we can make some space for stillness, for quiet reflection, it would bring rich rewards. Maybe to ponder on last things in some form. Not to get too hung up about judgement and hell, but so we can with more depth and perspective get on with living our life to the full, trusting God as our helper, Jesus as our guide and companion. Some time also to reflect on what the Christmas message really means to us – the message that our God is, not '*veiled* in flesh' as the hymn has it, but *revealed* in the flesh, as a human being, among us, and inviting us to receive a share in his divine life, which he offers to us. The great sign of this his offering is right here, in this Eucharistic meal.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel *has* come to thee, O New Israel!

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