

Advent Talk I

Firstly, let me say thank you for coming. Not that what I have to say is either original, or even necessarily inspiring, but it is a chance for us to gather as the Church in preparation for the coming of Our Lord. So thank you, that through your own efforts you are helping us all to enter into the spirit of the season. But let us begin, in that spirit by praying together:

You are our eternal salvation,
The unfailing light of the world.
Light everlasting,
You are truly our redemption.
Grieving that the human race was perishing
through the tempter's power,
without leaving the heights
You came to the depths in your loving kindness.
Readily taking our humanity by Your gracious will,
You saved all earthly creatures, long since lost,
Restoring joy to the world.
Redeem our souls and bodies, O Christ,
and so possess us as Your shining dwellings.
By Your first coming, make us righteous;
At your second coming, set us free:
So that, when the world is filled with light
and you judge all things,
We may be clad in spotless robes
and follow in Your steps, O King,
Into the heavenly hall.

This 10th century prayer, whose author is now unknown, very much sets the scene for what Advent is. More especially, it brings out the two-fold nature of the coming of Christ. That is: the first coming at Christmas which we are most certainly thinking about in our secular world as we see Advent merely as a preparation for Christmas and then, perhaps even more necessary for us today, is the necessity to prepare for the time when Christ will come again to judge the living the dead. Advent is, to paraphrase the football definition, a season of two halves and those halves are played, chronologically speaking, back to front. We spend the first fortnight or so considering the second coming and then, from the 17th December and following, we consider the birth of Christ in the stable so long ago.

Given we have only two evenings to talk about Advent: it makes sense, then, to talk this evening about that second coming and then next week we will look more specifically at the Christmas tale and the meaning for the incarnation in the

history of salvation. Before this, however, I thought we might talk more tonight about setting the scene for the season of Advent. What is its history and what are the key markers of the season.

Well, first of all let's consider the naming of the season. I think it was the 20th century philosopher, Wittgenstein, who said the meaning of words is in their use and not their technical meaning. Nonetheless, it is often helpful to consider where the words come from and recently Pope Benedict XVI, during the first Evening Prayer of Advent last Saturday talked about the word Advent. The Pope is talking about St Paul's letter to the Thessalonians where he invites us to prepare for the "coming of our Lord Jesus Christ". Pope Benedict says: Paul uses, in fact, the word 'coming', in Latin *adventus*, from comes the term Advent ... which can be translated as 'presence', 'arrival', 'coming'. In the language of the ancient world it was a technical term used to indicate the arrival of a functionary or the visit of a king or emperor to a province. But it could also indicate the coming of the divinity, which goes out of concealment to manifest itself with power, or which is celebrated as present in worship. Christians adopted the word 'advent' to express their relationship with Jesus Christ: Jesus is King, who has entered into this poor 'province' called earth to visit everyone; he brings to participate in his advent those who believe in him, all those who believe in his presence in the liturgical assembly.

Yet Advent is about so much more than just our liturgical action whilst we are in Church. It is the start of the new liturgical year, and so it heralds not only the next season of Christmas, but the whole of the economy of salvation. It was St Thomas Aquinas who talked of the *exitus-redditus* as the notion of humanity emanating from God and yet to God we are to return. Throughout the liturgical year which can be very hard for young people especially, but also for all us, to understand the cycle of salvation. A teacher explained to me recently the difficulty of explaining to young child how we can be celebrating the birth of Jesus and then just weeks later he's a grown man and being crucified for our sins. This, of course, is because we want to think with a chronological head on our shoulders and not the *kairological* notion of our history. So we think about Christ coming at the end of time as the universal judge and rightly so. Yet we are ever subject to the judgement of Christ, which in many ways is down to our own self-judgment, or rather our own notion of knowing what our actions look like in the light of Jesus. It's a little like when we do something wrong and we know our parents will disapprove and we will be found wanting. Even though no judgement *per se* has been given, we know all too well the outcome of that judgment. Hence, the Church gives us this season to enable us to once again consider our lives and our readiness to meet our maker.

This talk of coming from God and returning to him brings to mind perhaps the most classic symbol of Advent today, and I am not talking about the advent calendar!

Those wonderful little chocolate treats we are tempted to invest in for our children. I am talking about the advent wreath. Probably every church now has an advent wreath, though it was not ever thus. It's really a pagan symbol that has been 'baptised' or given a Christian slant. Those who are cynical will say it is because the Church sought to smother pagan worship when it came amongst the pagans to stop their mid-winter celebrations. I prefer to think that it is a classic case of the Church seeing that which is good within the world clearly emanating from God and recognising the spark of the divine, the presence of holiness. The advent wreath, like the advent calendar, enhances a sense of waiting, counting the days. The five candles of the wreath mark the progress of advent by lighting a new candle each of the four Sunday's and on Christmas day itself. Thus we see a very clear link between the seasons and they are colour co-ordinated for ease of use. The three purple candles represent the Sundays marking the week. The pink is merely the Gaudete Sunday of advent and then the white is the light of the Lord present to us on Christmas Day. It is white because it also represents the resurrection, so even at the heart of Christmas already we are anticipating our salvation through His resurrection.

Just to make an aside, let's look at Gaudete Sunday. It's often and easily confused with Laetare Sunday which occurs in Lent. Both Sunday's are named after the first word, in Latin, of the introit of the Mass. In the case of Advent, "Gaudete in Domino" Rejoice in the Lord, always, and again I say, rejoice. During Lent it is "Laetare Jerusalem", O be joyful, Jerusalem". The fact I connect both Lent and Advent speaks very much of an aspect of the nature of Advent which is often overlooked and that is the fasting or penitential nature of the season. Both seasons celebrate the midpoint with joy as a sort of relief of the severity of the rest of the season. On Gaudete Sunday rose-coloured vestments may be worn instead of purple which is prescribed for every day in the season of Advent. During the otherwise penitential season of Advent, the readings on the third Sunday emphasize the joyous anticipation of the Lord's coming. Gaudete Sunday shouldn't be confused with the much loved Christmas Carol from the middle ages, Gaudete, and made popular by artists such as Steeleye Span. They sing: Gaudete, gaudete! Christus est natus ex Maria virgine, gaudete! translated as Rejoice, rejoice! Christ is born of the Virgin Mary, rejoice! Not much anticipation in that statement!

The advent wreath has much other than the colour of its candles, however, to commend it to us. The wreath probably dates back to pre-Christian times when in Scandinavia especially and lesser so in Germany a wheel was decorated with candles and prayers were offered up to the God of Light to turn the wheel of the earth toward the sun and bring about the longer warmer days. In the middle ages it became customary to use the wreath as a means for Christians to prepare during advent for Christmas. Father William Saunders, an American priest writing in the Arlington Catholic Herald says:

The symbolism of the Advent wreath is beautiful. The wreath is made of various evergreens, signifying continuous life. Even these evergreens have a traditional meaning which can be adapted to our faith: The laurel signifies victory over persecution and suffering; pine, holly, and yew, immortality; and cedar, strength and healing. Holly also has a special Christian symbolism: The prickly leaves remind us of the crown of thorns, and one English legend tells of how the cross was made of holly. The circle of the wreath, which has no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul, and the everlasting life found in Christ. Any pine cones, nuts, or seedpods used to decorate the wreath also symbolize life and resurrection. All together, the wreath of evergreens depicts the immortality of our soul and the new, everlasting life promised to us through Christ, the eternal Word of the Father, who entered our world becoming true man and who was victorious over sin and death through His own passion, death, and resurrection. The four candles represent the four weeks of Advent. A tradition is that each week represents one thousand years, to sum to the 4,000 years from Adam and Eve until the Birth of the Saviour.

I think today we doubt the traditional counting of 4,000 years of history between Adam and Christ, but we can see immediately the great help which symbols like an advent wreath offer to us in our spiritual preparation for the coming of Christ. Those medieval monks and nuns were on to a winner I suspect.

To get back to our particular focus of Advent: the second coming of Christ. In the book *Advent and Christmastide* from the CTS (available to buy tonight!) there is a wonderful Dickensian like reflection on Christmas Past, Christmas Present and, what they title, Judgement Yet To Come. The author writes: When we reflect on Christmas yet to come, we cannot fail to be anxious and fearful, no matter how joyful and confident we are of His love, when we remember that at some date, maybe soon, maybe in millions' of years' time, human history will be wound up, and a reckoning made of all that we have done, all that we have failed to do. "For if you should mark our iniquities, Lord who could endure it?" (Ps 129:3) But His judgment is loving and merciful, for all who acknowledge their guilt and fly to Him for forgiveness will surely be welcomed. That is why part of our Advent must be examination of conscience, confession and absolution; and a mood of penitence and self-denial that befits our realisation that we have failed to live in love of His presence.

This passage helps us to see that whilst it is true to say we stand individually and personally accountable before the Lord, we do so as part of the Church. You're not alone, as the rap song by Olive goes: You're Not Alone; Stay Strong, No Time To Feel Weak; Wake Up Its Time To look deep; Don't Wait To The End Of Time. So Advent is a time for us to journey together toward the Lord who calls us today.

Finally, I want to finish with something I read on a Dominican blog recently - written by Nicholas Crowe OP, from the Godzdogz blog:

The opening of the little window in our Advent calendar was a very solemn family ritual when I was a child, performed just before my brother and I were packed off to bed. As we got closer and closer to Christmas day the knot of excitement in my stomach used to get bigger and bigger ... Advent calendars are often at the heart of little family traditions. For me, this emphasizes the communal dimension of this liturgical season. We, as a community, as a Church, wait in hope for the glorious coming of our Saviour. We count the days, just as Mary, Mother of God and symbol of the Church, must have counted down the days until the birth of her child.

We wait in hope for the coming of the Son of God, born of Mary. We wait in expectation, but there must also be preparation. Every family makes ready a place for a new baby in the weeks and months before the child is born. In this season of Advent we must prepare ourselves to receive Christ once more.

My father once told me that when he became a parent there was not one part of his life that was not compromised. The responsibility of caring for a fragile and delicate human life touched every corner of his world. I think in many ways this is a good image of the spiritual life. Christ breathes new life into our souls. Through baptism we are born anew. We must nourish and care for this new life inside us, and allow the grace of God to fill our entire being.

Christ is calling us to prepare a way for him; our response must embrace every dimension of our lives.

O Wisdom,

Holy Word of God

You rule all creation with power and true concern.

- Come teach us the way of salvation.

Fr Paul

Christ the King, Coventry 2009