

Advent Talk II

As last week, I would like to start with a prayer and this is the Advent prayer composed by our Holy Father Benedict XVI:

Mary, Virgin of expectation and Mother of hope, revive the spirit of Advent in your entire Church, so that all humanity may start out anew on the journey towards Bethlehem, from which it came, and that the Sun that dawns upon us from on high will come once again to visit us, Christ our God. Amen.

Last week we talked particularly about the Second Coming of Christ, as Pope Benedict says in his prayer: 'that the Sun that dawns upon us from on high will come once again to visit us'. We talked also, a lot, about the signs particular to Advent and the traditions we were aware of as children, and those which we hope, in our own way, to pass on to our children and our children's children. This week, I am going to concentrate more on the latter part of the season of Advent, as the Pope prays: 'all humanity may start out anew on the journey towards Bethlehem, from which it came'.

As a reminder, we talked about how the word Advent comes from the Latin, *adventus*, meaning coming. It particularly meant the coming of the King or a governor to his province. The early Christians came to understand that in the Word becoming flesh in the stable in Bethlehem, the Lord had come to the province of earth and so it was appropriate that the technical term of his coming, the *adventus*, was used as the time of preparation for Christmas and all that entailed. In more recent times, Advent has been seen, liturgically, as the period from the first Sunday of Advent to the 16th of December as the period for preparing spiritually for the Second Coming and then from the 17th December to Christmas eve as the period in preparing for that first coming in the manger.

Perhaps the most common traditional form of this intense period is reflected in the 'O' antiphons. The seven "O Antiphons" (also called the "Greater Antiphons" or "Major Antiphons") are prayers that come from the Breviary's Vespers during the Octave before Christmas Eve, a time which is called the "Golden Nights." The antiphons are sung or said in the evening just before the Magnificat, the great hymn of Our Lady. This ancient tradition dates back at least to the Middle Ages in monasteries across Europe.

Each Antiphon begins with "O" and addresses Jesus with a unique title which comes from the prophecies of Isaiah and Micah, and whose initials, when read backwards, form an acrostic for the Latin "Ero Cras" which means "Tomorrow I come." Those titles for Christ are: Sapientia, Adonai, Radix Jesse, Clavis David, Oriens, Rex Gentium, Emmanuel. I'll explain in more detail in a moment. An instant awareness of these great antiphons is clear when we think of the hymn, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. It is for this reason that this particular hymn, whilst often sang

during advent, is really proper after the 17th. The English translations of the antiphons, which run in order, as Wisdom, Lord, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Dayspring, King of all Nations and, finally, God with us.

Often monasteries would treat the 17th December as a day for feasting with a nice meal or a glass of wine and sometimes members of the community take it in turns to sing the antiphon. For example, the gardener might sing the 'root of Jesse' and the gatekeeper might sing the 'key of David' antiphon. This year we plan to listen to each of the 'o' antiphons at the start of each Mass and a little explanation will be given for them in turn. I'll not ruin that now, but rather we'll move on to talk about the remaining two Sundays of Advent.

This Sunday we celebrate 'gaudete' Sunday. We talked about this last week, so I won't dwell on it too much here. We know the priest and deacon often wear pink or rose vestments and we light the third advent candle, again often pink. The readings for the third Sunday of Advent reintroduce the character of John the Baptist. He is a very helpful and inspiring character from Scripture who leads us to Jesus. We might reflect that we are now half way through Advent and we can ask ourselves, have we truly readied ourselves for the coming of the Christ at Christmas? The Baptist will remind us on Sunday to 'prepare the way of the Lord and to make a home in our hearts. St Augustine asks:

"What does 'to prepare the way' mean, except to pray as you ought, to be humble minded? Take an example of humility from John himself. He is thought to be the Christ, but he says he is not what people think. He knew where his salvation lay. He understood that he was a lamp, and he was afraid of being quenched by the wind of pride."

This is beautiful imagery which we can easily apply to our own lives. Are we holding a torch for Christ: an expression of love? Yet we too may fear that through our own pride or indeed the pressures of our all too secular world may blow out that flame of love and leave us in the darkness, far from the healing light of Christ. Sometimes our Faith can seem tiny and such a small part of our everyday lives, and yet we know, deep in our hearts, that we must protect and nourish that flame and allow it to grow ever brighter. Such that we become the light for others to follow and, through our own witness, others may see the way to the Lord.

The fourth and final Sunday of Advent is the perfect time to bring in the really heavy guns! They don't get any bigger than Mary, of course. Some would say that the whole of Advent is Marian in nature and that we, like Mary, are preparing ourselves for the birth of the Saviour. A wonderful personal reflection to make, especially if you are a parent, is to think about those final days before giving birth. Think of all the preparations that are necessary. What must have been going through Mary's mind? What about Joseph. How did we prepare? We know the

classic story of the journey to Bethlehem and finding no room at the inn, but what about how Jesus' parents must have been feeling. Were they desperate, were they worried, were they just plain exhausted? Or were they overjoyed, the birth of their first-born, were they excited?

Mary, of course, is not just the Mother of God (as if that were not enough) but she is also his most faithful follower, and a model of Christianity. St Anselm says:

"God gave to Mary his Son, the only begotten of his heart, equal to himself, whom he loved as himself. From Mary he fashioned himself a Son, not another one but the same, so that by nature there would be one and the same Son both of God and of Mary. Every nature is created by God, and God is born of Mary. God created all things and Mary gave birth to God. God himself, who made all things, made himself from Mary. In this way he remade all that he had made. He who was able to make all things out of nothing, when they had been defaced would not remake them without Mary's help."

This is powerful stuff from St Anselm and offers enormously deep theological reflection for us. Too profound for us to plumb the depths this evening, but we can really begin to grasp the enormity of the Incarnation which we are about to celebrate at the end of Advent. No wonder we need a whole season to get ready for it.

Such is the enormity of the Incarnation that the Church, rightly, affords it its own season. So on the eve of Christmas, as we gather to celebrate the first Mass of Christmas, The Nativity of Our Lord, we will see the clergy decked no longer in the penitential purple, but rather the wonder of white. Watch out for Gold, too, this year. In the booklet 'Advent and Christmastide' by the CTS (still available to buy!), it is written: 'they tell us that Easter is the most important feast of the Christian year, but instinctively we love Christmas more.' Don't you think they are right? Certainly whilst I love the celebration of the Easter Vigil, it's the season of Christmas to which my heart belongs.

The CTS booklet, however, makes clear that the Incarnation is rightly more appropriately celebrated as the Annunciation, when Mary conceived the Son of God. It is, obviously, the Birth of Our Lord which we celebrate on Christmas Day. The Encyclopaedia of Catholicism, edited by Richard McBrien says that we celebrate 'on December 25th to commemorate the incarnation of the divine Word at the birth of Jesus Christ.' For some explanation of why it's the 25th December which is celebrated in the Church as Christmas day have a read of the CTS booklet. It also goes on to give an explanation of some of the traditions of Christmas, including the crib, the decorations, the tree and the giving of Christmas presents. Fascinating stuff!

It is, nonetheless, about Advent we are talking; about preparing for the coming of Christmas, not Christmas itself. Perhaps this is the subject of future talks. As we continue to open the doors of our Advent calendars and we continue to prepare for the coming of the child Jesus on Christmas Day. We perhaps need to be mindful that there is still time to prepare the way of the Lord. As Augustine told us, this is surely through prayer. Our Walk With Me booklets give us daily reflections to aid us in our spiritual exercises. One prayer, which struck me as appropriate in the midst of our busyness of preparations, is:

Lord, may we find moments of peace so that you can find our hearts ready to receive you afresh. May a silent night or a cold morning herald your quiet coming into our lives. May familiar melodies raise again within us a song of joy to your love. Amen.

The Walk With Me booklet gives a 'word for the world' so appropriate as countries meet in Copenhagen:

Concern for our environment today makes us more sensitive to every form of pollution. Light pollution, for example, not only obscures the beauty of the heavens but can also disrupt the rhythms of animal life. In a similar way excessive noise drowns out all the important communication of bird song. Noise also drowns out our inner life, filling the 'echo chambers' of our spiritual selves so that we no longer hear the quiet promptings of the Holy Spirit, nor the murmur of our own deepest needs. Advent is a time to cultivate an inner peace. It is a time to enter into the darkness of our inner selves, unafraid of what we might find and confident that, in fact, the light of God's presence will shine most brightly in our darkness.'

The darkness from which the light of Christ will shine most brightly is to be welcomed and so we do well to continue the preparation began at our baptism. During the rite of baptism we talk of entering into the tomb with Christ that we might also rise with him. We are not alone, however, in this endeavour. Many have walked the path before us, and probably many will continue it long after we have gone.

The preface of Mass which, the world over, we have been listening to these last says 'now we watch for the day, hoping that the salvation promised us will be our when Christ our Lord will come again in his glory.' From the 17th December onwards the priest will lead us in praying the second preface of Advent. Listen now to the words and then let us join in the song of the angels, not the Sanctus as we normally do, but the song of the angels heard first on Christmas morning...

Father, all powerful and ever living God, we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks through Jesus Christ our Lord.

His future coming was proclaimed by all the prophets. The Virgin mother bore him in her womb with love beyond all telling. John the Baptist was his herald and

made him known when at last he came. In his love Christ has filled us with joy as we prepare to celebrate his birth, so that when he comes he may find us watching in prayer, our hearts filled with wonder and praise.

And so, will all the choirs of angels in heaven we proclaim your glory as we echo on earth the song first heard by those lowly shepherds:

Glory to God in the highest....

Fr Paul

Christ the King, Coventry 2009