

Prepare for the King

Preached on First Sunday in Advent
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ, Vt.
Nov. 29, 2020
Text: Rom. 13: 8-14

Today is the First Sunday in Advent, and it is a time of preparation and self-inventory. The vestments and paraments are violet, which signals a time of penitence and even mourning. Our secular culture omits anything penitential, of course, and demands instant joy. Christmas decorations are going up, credit cards are coming out, and expectations are rising—not, mind you, for the coming of the Lord, but for all that we’ve come to understand by “the Christmas Season.

But this is not the Christmas Season. That begins on the 25th of December and lasts 12 days until the Feast of the Epiphany. This is Advent, a four-week time of making our hearts and minds ready, and looking with expectation, as we await the coming of Christ. On the one hand, we remember what it was like for God’s people in the centuries between the return of the Exiles to the Holy Land and the fulfilment of the Prophets’ predictions about the coming of the Messiah. On the other hand, we remember that we, too, are exiles in this world, simultaneously living in God’s Kingdom and expecting its fulfilment, as we await the Messiah’s return.

In our circumstances, it’s probably nigh-impossible not to mix in a bit of Christmas celebration during Advent. It’s difficult to be penitential when the airwaves are full of beloved Christmas music, we start to see Christmas lights in all their glittering glory, and people generally are in a more festive mood. Are Christians who take seriously the liturgical seasons supposed to be grim and somber, while everyone else is full of holiday cheer? No, and that sort of conspicuous public misery was warned against by Jesus Himself. We are not to put on a big show of our fasting and self-denial. Still, we can and should focus more on preparing ourselves for the arrival of the Lord for the next few weeks.

First, as our liturgical colors suggest, Advent is a time for repentance and even mourning. Advent becomes a little Lent, as it were. We should spend it taking stock of our lives, remembering God’s Law, admitting our failures to keep it, and throwing ourselves on God’s mercy. We should certainly spend time in the Scriptures. We should learn more about the King we’re awaiting. He is greatly to be praised and we should worship “in the beauty of holiness, as He is so very far above us. Yet, He also cares for all His creatures, even the least among us. He sits at the right hand of God, yet washed His disciples’ feet. If this is the God we truly believe in, then we must reveal this faith in our actions. We must show others the love of Christ by being Christ to them. In our Epistle reading from Romans 13, Paul tells us that we are to love our neighbor, and that is more than just generally wishing them well. You cannot love people in theory.

Harboring thoughts about “love of humanity” costs us nothing, and so is little more than cheap sentimentality. That is not the kind of love that Jesus has for people.

The kind of love that Christians should exhibit is the sort of love that puts other people first. It is a love that may cost us something. It is loving those who are not so lovable. This is difficult. And we all can easily see where we’ve failed at that, if we but spend a little time in self-examination. Therefore, we must repent. We must return to God, and then empowered by His Spirit, change our ways. Advent is a good time to undertake this sort of house cleaning.

There are a lot of people in dire straits right now. Many people are hurting at this time of year, even if they aren’t announcing it with a bullhorn. People have lost family; people have lost jobs and a place to live; people have lost hope. None of us know how significant a kind word or some material support can be to someone who has nothing. Reach out to them with the love of Christ. This is a good Advent discipline because it also brings us to focus more on the Lord himself. In fact, we are to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” as St. Paul says in our Epistle for today. This is something we can forget about when living in a culture that extols self-gratification.

For though this season can foster good cheer and neighborliness, it can also foster fleshliness. We are encouraged to be acquisitive, gluttonous, and just plain selfish. It brings me no happiness to say that we are a fairly entitled people. Plenty of people in stores are buying more for themselves than others. With the loss of God at the center of their lives, are we really surprised that people are looking out for Number 1, without even a hint of shame? During this season, we must resist walking after the flesh, even if the rest of the world is. Rather, we must consciously turn to Jesus, focus on Him, and seek to deny the world, the flesh, and the devil, with the help of the Holy Ghost.

This is one of the reasons we do things like lighting the Advent wreath and have special services like Lessons and Carols. These are opportunities to bring us back to Christ. Even at home you can do some of these things. In its simplest form, you can pray today’s collect (after all, the rubric assigns it for every day of Advent, not just the first week), sing a hymn, like “O Come, O Come Immanuel,” and pray that God will show you someone you can help. This is also a good period in which to undertake a fast. The point is to build up an expectation of Our Lord’s coming, both as we celebrate it in the Nativity, and for his return. This is why our first Gospel reading of the Advent season is the Triumphal Entry, from Matthew 21:

“Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.” (Matt. 21:1-3)

The passage begins with Jesus sending the disciples to find a donkey in fulfillment of Zechariah 9. The fulfillment of the prophecy is a bold statement that Jesus is the one

we're waiting for, the one we've been expecting. Presents, good food, family, and the "Christmas spirit" can point us to the better things that Jesus brings us. Or, they can be poor substitutes when we place expectations upon them that they cannot bear. Instead, we are to focus on Jesus, and other things in our lives will fall into their proper places. Use Advent to bring your eyes back to the King who entered Jerusalem on a donkey and then cleansed the Temple.

We all have areas of our lives that need cleansing, areas where the world, the flesh, and the devil have set up shop. In this Advent season, let's allow the Lord to cleanse the temple of our souls. Let his word drive out anything that is trespassing there. This is a good time for that sort of cleansing. And then, be healed. The Lord's word cleanses and heals. The Lord's Spirit cleanses and heals, preparing our souls to be the very Temple of God.

Ultimately, this is what Advent is about: preparing us for the Lord's coming. Just as he entered creation in the Incarnation, just as he entered the Temple in Holy Week, just as he entered Heaven at the Ascension, he will return in glory to judge the quick and the dead, and to set the world to rights. May we be ready when he comes, as we await him in expectation and faith.

In the Name...