

SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



First Sunday of Advent, Year C

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Today we begin the season of Advent, which opens a new liturgical year. If you were to ask most people about Advent, they would tell you that this is the time of preparation for Christmas. And they would be perfectly correct. And yet, the Mass readings during Advent say little about the coming of the Christ Child in Bethlehem. On the contrary, the emphasis is on the glorious coming of Christ at the end of time, in the consummation of all things. Indeed, the readings are actually very like those of last Sunday, when we celebrated the Solemnity of Christ the King in a spirit of triumph and exultation.

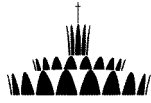
What, then, marks Advent as a special season of grace--what is its special character? As I thought about this, I remembered the words of the Catholic martyr, Mary Queen of Scots said as she went to her death: "In my end is my beginning." These words are especially fitting as a description of Advent: for it is only in the expectation of the coming of Christ's Kingdom that we can properly prepare for the liturgical remembrance of his coming in the flesh as the Baby of Bethlehem. Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End: having celebrated his Kingship, we now begin anew, so that we may be a new creation in Christ. In place of the sense of triumph and exultation of only a week ago, in Advent we now have a subdued spirit: not as severe and penitential as in Lent though, in its own way, just as serious. We experience a sense of longing for the Savior, of desire and of yearning as we await his coming at Christmas.

It is as if we have gone back to the opening chapter of Genesis, when in the beginning the Holy Spirit moved on the face of the waters, and all was created. In just such a way, the Holy Spirit overshadowed Our Lady, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and made her fruitful. So now we await the revealing of Jesus, the blessed fruit of her womb.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux says that in this holy season we recall and evoke three comings of Christ: first, his coming in the flesh when he was conceived in the womb of Mary and born in Bethlehem; second, his continual coming in grace into our hearts; and finally, his coming in glory at the end of time.

For the faithful of the last several centuries, the emphasis during the Advent and Christmas season has often been placed upon the first two comings and not so much on the last, that is, on the coming of Christ's Kingdom in glory and in judgment.

And yet, it is this this third advent of Christ in glory and in judgment that is the key to a proper understanding of his coming in the flesh and of his coming in grace into our hearts. St. Luke says, "And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with



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power and great glory. But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.” The entire season of Advent strikes this note of expectant hope as well as of divine judgment, of longing for the triumph of God’s Kingdom and of awareness that we must be clothed in Christ’s holiness if we are to enter into his glory. In the Church’s liturgical and sacramental life, we have a foretaste of the new heavens and the new earth that the Lord has promised us. No less surely, we have need of being purified before we can enter into the Kingdom, for we must be blameless in holiness, as St. Paul tells the Thessalonians (1 Th 3.12-4.2)

Without this awareness of God’s holiness and of our need for purification before we face his judgment, our love of the Christ Child in the manger will be out of focus. If we cease to believe that our God is a consuming fire, then the love manifest in the mystery of Christmas is trivialized.

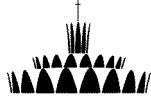
For we cannot speak of God’s love without speaking of his transcendent holiness, and therefore of what the Savior’s love has cost him in assuming our human nature. The Cross of the Savior is both the divine judgment upon a sinful world as well as the fulfillment of divine mercy. We impoverish our season of Advent if we soft-pedal this aspect of divine judgment.

In other words, we mustn’t preach cheap grace. And what is cheap grace? Isn’t grace, by definition, a pure gift of God, freely given and un-earned? Indeed it is. It was the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who himself laid down his life for Christ, who explained what he meant by criticizing the notion of cheap grace. Bonhoeffer described cheap grace as follows:

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate” (The Cost of Discipleship, p. 47).

Notice the emphasis on confession and absolution: a very Catholic thing for a Protestant theologian to emphasize! Bonhoeffer’s point is borne out by the location of today’s gospel reading, which occurs immediately before the account of the Last Supper and of the Passion of Our Lord. In Luke’s theology, the destruction of Jerusalem already prefigures and symbolizes the end-times. This divine judgment of which Scripture speaks so often is not merely one of destruction, of tearing down; rather, it is the humbling of human pride so that we may be built up again in Christ and renewed in his image.

Sacramental confession does precisely that in the Christian life. In confession, in the tribunal of mercy, no one accuses us; we accuse ourselves, and so open ourselves to the mercy of God. In the sacrament of penance, no one is pointing fingers or casting any stones. In confession, the purifying judgment of God becomes a means of healing and sanctifying rather than of condemnation. That is what it truly means to be justified by the



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grace of God. For when in the sacrament of penance we come to Christ with empty hands, we can truly say with the prophet Jeremiah, “God is our justice.” For this reason, the Catechism says that the forgiveness of sins is a miracle like the creation of the universe or the resurrection of the dead.

If we would share the joy of Advent, we must recover our sense of God’s holiness and of his judgment as well as of his mercy. In practical terms, I have two suggestions for this Advent: confession and the prayer of the rosary of Our Lady. The rosary is especially fitting at this time of year because Advent is the Marian season par excellence, and in Mary we behold the most perfect fruit of the grace of Christ. I urge you to resume praying the rosary if you have let it slip away. If possible, pray it together as a family. By holding fast both to confession and to a tender devotion to the Mother of God, we hold inseparably to God’s love and to his utter holiness. Confession reminds us that we need true repentance and amendment of life; and by invoking the glorious intercession of Our Lady, our hope is raised to the heavenly Jerusalem, where she has preceded us. For Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end; and the glory of Our Lady is precisely to be perfectly conformed to her divine Son. In her Immaculate Conception, she has participated by anticipation in the New Creation; in her glorious Assumption, she anticipates our own glorification in Christ; and by her intercession in heaven, she engenders in us the life of grace, till Christ be formed in us. And in Mary there is fullness of grace, overflowing beyond anything we can comprehend; but there is no cheap grace. For in Mary as in us, grace is freely given and yet costs us everything: for the grace of Christ requires of us the surrender of our very selves.

To express the spirit of Advent most simply, let us then close with two simple prayers:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us.

O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.