

Advent I C

Luke 21:25-36

Since we are starting the season of Advent this Sunday, and, therefore, a new cycle through the church year, I thought a review of the historical background of the church's calendar and what its seasons are about might be appropriate. For most of you this may well be old hat. In that case, you have permission to let your minds wander, as they probably would anyway.

The church year is divided into two parts: the beginning of Advent to the Day of Pentecost and the Day of Pentecost back to the First Sunday of Advent. The first half of the church's year, from Advent until the Day of Pentecost, tells the story of the life of Jesus. It moves through preparation for his coming, during Christmas season we celebrate his presence, during the season of Epiphany his ministry, during Lent it's preparation for his death. During Easter Season we celebrate his resurrection. And then, on the Day of Pentecost, we celebrate the continued presence of Jesus in this world. Notice I say "in this world" and not just in the church. Then the whole great, green, long, seemingly endless season of Pentecost is devoted to a difficult topic, one that deserves all that time. We've heard the story of Jesus, now what do we do with it? How shall his story change us? The season of Pentecost is trying to figure out what to do, in our lives, with the story we have heard during the first part of the year.

So the two parts of the year fit together. First, you hear the story. Then, you work at what to do with the story in practical terms. Then you start all over again, because, by the time the first Sunday of Advent comes around again, not only do you need the review, but you've changed enough that the story may well mean something different. As I get older, the stories I've been told in my family change in their meaning. Stories my parents told about themselves as young adults and parents assume a different meaning now than they had when I was twelve. It's the same thing in the church's year. The story of Jesus is always changing slightly in its meaning. We change, so the meaning of the story changes for us, and needs to be heard again.

This is one of the reasons for repetition, for the Christian life as recurring cycle. Let me put it another way. When I was much younger, and, consequently, my children also much younger, Lucy and I read to them, a lot. Nicholas was particularly fond of the volume from the Narnia Chronicles called The Horse and His Boy. I read it out loud to him, six times. Was this simply a liking for repetition? I don't think so. Nicholas's commentary on the story changed each time he heard it. There was something going on in him each time he heard the story that changed his relationship to it. That's what happens when stories which really have substance are taken seriously. They change us a bit each time we encounter them. It's not something superficial, from which the juice can be squeezed at the first reading. There is always something more to find, another angle to the story.

So I think the repetition in which the church year involves us is probably a good and necessary thing. There's not much written I can get pleasure from reading more than once. There are a few such books, but the language used, even in sermons, is designed for, shall we say, consumption at a gulp and no more. The complexity of my life, its kaleidoscopic changes, needs to be reflected in the unfolding shades of meaning in the Biblical story. This unfolding is timed to human experience and the Biblical story retains its relevance through its ability to speak with a multitude of shades of meaning, to catch and reflect the multitude of ages human beings

experience. This comment's the indulgence of a personal irritation, and no more.

Now, back to the structure of the church year and what goes on within it. There are two halves to the church year: the first gives us the story, the second is to help us respond to the story. We respond by casting it into symbols, struggling with its meaning, internalizing it and beginning to express it by means of our lives. Now, Advent Season, the season we're in right now, illustrates the perpetual tendency of the church, how do I want to put this, perhaps provocatively? It illustrates the continued tendency of the church to get it wrong. When I was young I was taught, "Oh, Advent. That's the season for getting ready for the birth of Christ." As I got older and began to listen to the lessons, I heard gospels such as the one read this morning. And I thought, "Not only do I not have the faintest idea what these people are talking about, [I'm still not sure that I do.] but, I cannot figure out what it has to do with the birth of Jesus." So I was a good little boy and, when in doubt, asked an adult. I asked my Sunday School teacher – who gave a completely unsatisfactory explanation which, no doubt, contributed to a growing hostility between us. Later on, exploring Advent Season, I discovered that, as with most things, there was more there than met the eye.

So, enough of the church year in general, what is there about Advent which is more than meets the eye? Let me give you a bit of ancient history. The lives of ancient emperors were very, very liturgical. Nearly everything they did was symbolic and ritualized. What this has to do with the season of Advent, is that there was a definite ceremony, gone through every time a Roman Emperor officially approached a town. This was especially true if coming back victorious from a military campaign or some other action which confirmed his status. It was called the "Adventus Ceremony". Parts of the ceremony are very much like parts of Advent Season: Ceremonies which let people know how close the emperor was to the city – we have so much time left, so we light another candle, and then another to mark the degrees of his approach. There were ancient imperial parallels to this kind of thing. And, for some of the most important parallels – Lucy, do you remember the number of the opening hymn?

Comment: Seventy something. 73

The king shall come when morning dawns (Hymnal 1982, #73) ". . . and light triumphant breaks . . ." Now, one of the themes of the imperial Adventus was that light came from the emperor's presence. The ceremony talked about the emperor's presence carrying light to his people, and, because of his victory, the dark night was over. His coming was compared, in these ceremonies, to the sun rising. There were prayers for his rapid coming, – *O haste the rising of that morn, the day that e'er shall last* – so even in the language of this hymn, we can see Christianity, once again, successfully appropriating the culture around it, but, as it appropriates, it also changes the meaning.

Put yourself back into the lives of the early Christians who invented Advent. It was not, to them, just the preparation for the coming of a child. It was a challenge to the whole world. To the ancient Christian, the ceremony of the Roman Emperor was paralleled by the ceremony offered to Christ. And the challenge was to choose the one which was deeper, was truer. In the end, the challenge was to decide which was to be more central to one's existence, the coming of

the Christ, or the coming of the world, represented by the emperor. That's what's behind Advent. It's a serious parody, an attempt to seize the initiative from the world by bringing the old ceremonial tools of a culture to focus on the new Christ, the true king who comes in hearts and sacraments as well as in history. So Advent's not just the season of getting ready for Christmas. It is a season of challenge which says, "Who will it be?" Which will make you who you are truly called to be? Where will your being come from? Will it come from the kind of hope that Christ presents to us or will it come from somewhere else, be it emperor, culture, economic system?

That's Advent, that's what it's about. It's preparation for the birth of Jesus only in the sense that Jesus is the living embodiment of the Advent challenge.

OK. That's enough of that. Please stand for the creed.