

Message for the First Sunday of Advent

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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'How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you'.

There are moments when Scripture outdoes itself. When – in private reading, or public worship – the Word reaches across the thickness of human history and readerly distraction, and lays hold of us; when the words of the sacred writers become ours, to a degree that we can only lamely describe as ‘uncanny’ or ‘mystical’. So it was when I looked up the readings appointed for today (www.lectionarypage.net, Advent 1, Year C) and came upon these words of Saint Paul.

For, in the two-and-a-half years since I last visited Ascension, it has indeed been my hope and prayer that my way would be directed back here. And it is joy that I have felt before God because of you during this visit. In fact, the words of the Apostle cannot be entirely my own. Because, in seeing you face to face, it is *my* faith that has been restored; *my* heart strengthened. In coming here, I feel I have come home: not merely in the sense of coming back to *this* particular place, but in the sense of coming home to the Church, the body of Christ. Or is it that – in my coming here – it is really Christ that, in you, has come back to me? The theme of *advent*, a word we take almost wholesale from the Latin *adventus*, meaning ‘coming’ or ‘arrival’, is already beginning to show itself.

And it does so in a similar way in Paul’s words to the Thessalonians. Paul’s *advent*, his hoped-for coming to the Thessalonians, is set within the ‘coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints’. In the time of Paul’s separation from the Thessalonians, his prayer is that they may be strengthened and so blameless at the coming of our Lord. And it is reasonable to assume that Paul’s coming to the Thessalonians would have the same effect as his prayer. His desire to come to them is a desire to ‘strengthen their hearts in holiness’, to prepare them for the *advent* of Christ. And I hope that – just as my time at Ascension this week has restored what is lacking in my faith – so too may I give something of the same back to you in this sermon: a preparation for the *advent* of the Lord.

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In Advent, the present is stretched in two opposite directions. We are stretched back to the distant event of Christ’s Nativity, and indeed yet further back, to the prophets of the Old Testament – Isaiah, Daniel and, today, Jeremiah – whose seering visions find their key in the coming of Christ. But we are also thrown forward to the ‘four last things’: to Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell, as symbolized in the four candles of our Advent Wreath. We are thrown forward to the end of our own lives and to the end of all creation, to the *Second Coming* of Christ, when – at last – God will be all in all. *Advent* addresses both that coming of God to earth in Bethlehem and the coming of the Son of Man in the clouds. And Advent tells us that both these comings meet in the present time: that the present of our own lives is at once the coming of the Lord in great humility *and* His coming in judgement.

But this is also the dynamic of every Sunday: when we celebrate the Mass, we set the present of the liturgy under the sign of Christ's gift of Himself upon the Cross. We look back but also forward, to the coming kingdom already present among us. 'And so, Father, calling to mind his death on the cross, his perfect sacrifice made once for the sins of the whole world; rejoicing in his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension, and looking for his coming in glory, we celebrate this memorial of our redemption'.

And yet, how many of us can say that – when the priest speaks these words – we do indeed call these things to mind? How often have these words been a reproach to me for *not* undertaking that work of bringing the present under the sign of Christ's death, resurrection and ascension? For this opening of the present is a particular discipline of the Christian life. And how hard it is! When the present is so all-consuming, as indeed it has been in recent months: the intensity of anxiety, grief, despair and pain that accompanies pandemic, the deterioration of our political life, the threat of war and the decimation of the natural world. Not only must we soberly confront the immensity of the present, but we must do so by living in the light of events so remote in time and place that they can seem insignificant, and a future so unfathomable that it can hardly get a purchase on the all-too-immediate reality of the present? Indeed, it is a kind of crucifixion, if we think of it as a *stretching*, akin to Christ embracing all of human history in his arms upon the Cross.

So we need these seasons of special intention, when the sacred co-ordinates in which our lives unfold, that first *and* second coming of the LORD, are brought repeatedly before us. In the English Book of Common Prayer, the collect for next Sunday asks that the faithful may 'inwardly digest' the words of Scripture. This is what Advent is for: a process of inward digestion, through which we see our lives as part of the perpetual *coming* of Jesus to Creation. Rowan Williams – in a sermon on the Transfiguration – speaks of the difference between being dazzled by the light of Christ and learning to see everything else in this new light. In Advent, I would suggest that both aspects of this are at work: we look directly at the mysteries of Nativity and Judgement and then look back upon our own lives, marking how it changes through this transformation of perspective. In the time I have left, I want to dwell a little on that last thing, *Judgement*, which seems so prominent in our readings today.

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'The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land' (Jeremiah 33:14). Why, we might ask, is this fulfillment of God's promise also a judgement, for Jeremiah? Because the ancient Israelites have refused to meet God where he seeks to meet them. 'Does the snow of Lebanon leave the crags of Sirion? Do the mountain waters run dry, the cold flowing streams? But my people have forgotten me' (Jeremiah 18:14-15). The hunger and greed, the avidity of God's people is an all-consuming activity, one which blocks the road by which the LORD seeks to meet his people. 'If you listen to me, and bring in no burden by the gates of this city on the sabbath day, but keep the sabbath day holy [...] then there shall enter by the gates of this city kings who sit on the throne of David' (Jeremiah 17: 24-25).

So it is also with the coming of our LORD all those years ago. Still the same hardness of heart, which compelled to drive the traders from the Temple. And today and always, still the same hardness of heart means the Coming of Jesus Christ is judgement. The Advent or 'First Coming' of the Lord, His Nativity and Crucifixion, is already *judgement* upon us: for in these events the distance between our hearts and the heart of God is made manifest. So the Advent of the Lord must also, in some sense, be our homecoming, as the Prodigal Son, who comes to his senses and realizes how far he is from where he thought he was; how far God is from where we think God *ought* to be...

As a British citizen, I cannot help but think of those so desperate to cross the Channel, to come from the land of our Lord's birth and make their home with us. I cannot but think of the twenty seven people, including a seven-year-old girl, who drowned on Wednesday as they tried to reach the UK. I think especially of a photo I saw of a mother, Khazal Ahmed (45) and our her three children, Hadia (22), Mubin (16) and Hasti (7), all of whom drowned that day. And I think of Mary, begging to be allowed into any inn in Bethlehem, so that she might do them the honour of giving birth to the Son of God in their midst. Where are we in the story of Christmas? Are we the Magi, are we the shepherds? Or are we not the innkeepers, whose hardness of heart means they merit little more than a half phrase in the Gospels? I think of the crucifix that stands outside this church, together with the words 'is it nothing to you, all ye who pass by'? And I wonder: is it nothing to us that, this Advent, this Christmas, it may be God who passes us by, because we don't think Him worth the room.

So when we come to the altar to receive the sacrament today, look at that wafer: that tasteless, colourless disk of apparent insignificance and know that it is *there* that God meets us bodily. And when we return to the pew, let us pray that our eyes may be opened to see the Lord wherever He comes to meet us. Let us pray that this Advent, we would not be 'weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life', but instead be ready, so that 'when we see these things taking place', we might run and hide, but instead 'stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near'. AMEN.