

Date: November 28, 2021 (Advent 1, Year C)

1. Texts: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Ps. 25:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36.
2. Subject: ecclesiology.
3. Topic: Advent as preparation.
4. Aim: challenge.
5. Proposition: "Advent prepares us for the release for which we crave."

ADVENT IS THE SEASON OF RELEASE

Please do not ask any cleric for the reasons behind the calendar of the Church. The calendar is ancient and hugely complicated. It arose only after the fact, only after the Church was already using set days for certain celebrations and obligations. No one can explain the *WHY* of the Church calendar or exactly how it came to be. It just is.

So, I can't explain why the Church year begins on the Sunday after St. Andrew's feast day. Nope, can't explain it. No one really knows why Advent 1 is the New Year's Day of the Church. It just is.

I can explain why we use the colours purple or blue. I can explain the one rose-coloured candle in the Advent wreath. I can—and will—point out the difficulties in understanding Advent, just like the difficulties in understanding Lent or the timing of Easter. I can even explain why we move nearly every feast day that happens to fall on a Sunday to the next available weekday. But I can't explain the beginning of the Church year. It just is.

However, I would like to explain the purpose and intent of the Advent season.

Advent is *NOT* the time to prepare for Christmas. Oh, go ahead and prepare for Christmas. That's certainly important enough to do. You don't want to get caught unawares by Christmas, especially if you have a granddaughter coming to visit. But preparing for Christmas is *NOT* what the Church is doing during Advent. The Church is not preparing to celebrate the first coming of Christ or that famous birth in the stable in Bethlehem.

In Advent, the Church is preparing to greet Christ at his Second Coming. Advent is not about celebrating the past. It is about being ready for the future.

So it is that the Church sometimes uses the colour purple during Advent, to highlight the penance required to meet Christ at his coming. So it is that the Church sometimes uses the colour blue during Advent, to raise our hope in the face of our impending release from this world. The rose candle proclaims the joy of the Church at being made the tool and recipient of God's full justice, righteousness and compassion. Many a priest and many a congregation will avoid the singing of Christmas carols during Advent and delay the decorating of the parish Christmas tree until the last suitable moment. In Advent we don't look backwards at that birth. We look forwards to our release from sin and to the eternity we are to spend in God's loving presence.

I still can't tell you why the Church's new year begins on Advent 1. But at least we know what Advent is about. Advent is never preparation to celebrate the First Coming but rather preparation to greet the Second.

We have to somehow make that preparation meaningful.

On a personal and individual level, let's use Advent as a time for self-reflection, for examining the barriers between God and ourselves. We all must admit that such barriers exist. We are sometimes petty and judgmental. We are frequently self-centred and maybe even selfish. The people who protest outside of health care facilities and refuse to get vaccinated against Covid-19 demonstrate that so very visibly.

We might also demonstrate pride or envy. We might exercise prejudice and racism. Our colonial past is a clear demonstration of the barriers that exist. It could benefit us greatly if we were to practice self-examination with the goal of surrendering our barriers to God through contrition and repentance. You see, I don't think anyone of us wants to have to overcome our barriers at the last moment, when we see Christ standing on the horizon, inviting us to enter his eternal kingdom.

So, our self-examination and reflection have to end up in prayer for and a commitment to a transformed life. It's not enough to just recognize that we have a problem with judgment or jealousy or whatever. We have to also come to the point of dealing with it, of surrendering our old way of being to enter more fully into the way of the cross.

This is where the content of our prayers definitely matters.

It is not enough to pray, "O Lord, I am sorry for the ways I have behaved. Please forgive me." Confession is not enough. We also have to repent.

To repent is to change our fundamental direction. Instead of moving away from God through our judgement, critical spirit or whatever, we have move toward God by becoming transparent, accepting and loving. We move away from injustice and towards God's righteousness. We move out of being the centre of our own existence so that God may become ever more the centre of our lives. That's what repentance means, and it always must follow confession.

We must also pray for those who have been hurt by our barriers. These are the victims of our self-centredness, pride or whatever. They may not even know that they have been victimized, but they are victims nonetheless. We pray for them and not in any "God-bless-Mommy-and-Daddy" sort of way. We pray for them as we would want to be prayed for.

Father, forgive me for my barriers to your love. Give me the grace to change my life according to the model of Christ. Grant me the ability to love this person with a self-sacrificing love. Heal any wounds which I have inflicted. Be with this person in their walk with you. Draw them closer to yourself. Grant them courage and strength to turn their hearts to you and to be comforted by you. Please, Lord, heal us both. Amen.

It's becoming obvious how different Advent is from our preparations for Christmas. In Advent we are getting ready for the Judgement Day, for the return of the Messiah and for the advent of our new existence.

Considering the condition of the world and of our own Church, we would probably do well to extend the season of preparation to, oh, perhaps 52 weeks instead of just four. While I don't think that the end is actually imminent, I do think that the world would benefit from preparing for the end.

So, let's try this. Let's try a campaign of prayer for the people that we meet. As we might pray for the people victimized by our own barriers, let's pray for the people who might be victimized by others. And to make that meaningful, let's make it specific and personal.

Every time you have an opportunity to tell someone that you are a Christian, ask, "May I pray with you right now?" When they say, "Uh, sure, if you want," then pray:

Lord God of the Universe, be with *name* right now. Guard *his/her* spirit and soul. Walk with *her/him* throughout this day. Uphold *name* in all that is a burden in *his/her* life. Lord, we especially pray for courage and strength in... Lord, we ask you to use your faithful people as companions in all that *she/he* faces. I invite you into this relationship right now, that you may lead and guide us both, now and always. Amen.

Or something like that.

Then ask, "Would it be alright if I continued to pray for you on my own?" When they say, "Uh, sure, if you want," then keep your promise and pray.

Then say, "If you want, you can always let me know how God is answering our prayers. Here's my phone number..."

Of course, if you offer to pray with them, and they flat out say, "No way," then you say, "That's ok. Maybe another time."

But let's help the world to prepare for the Second Coming by praying for everyone we can. Let's mount a campaign of public prayer, so that people will recognize us as the disciples who not only believe in prayer, but pray. Let's

become famous for praying for others at the drop of a hat and at every opportunity.

Yes, I know this is risky. You may experience rejection. But I hope—and pray—that rejection will be less frequent than you might assume. I have this inkling—a beginning of an understanding—that our proclamation of the gospel might be more tangible and powerful in our prayers than in our conversations. In preparation for the return of the Christ, let us pray and so let us proclaim God's love in word and deed.

I think that's how we could extend the season of Advent so that our whole lives become our preparation for the return of our King.

AMEN.