

Advent



Historical Background

Lent-Easter-Pentecost is the chief focus of the liturgical year and historically its oldest element. This sequence celebrates the Paschal Mystery of our salvation by the death and rising of Jesus, Our Lord.

A second important focus of the Church year is “the celebration and expectation of the coming of Christ, a theme extended in current western liturgical practice over the many weeks that comprise the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle.”¹

Advent is focused on the various comings of the Redeemer. The first Sunday especially focuses on the final Parousia—Christ’s glorious coming at the end of time. The second and third Sundays highlight John the Baptist’s heralding of Christ’s earthly coming. The fourth and final Sunday concerns itself with the immediate historical prelude to Jesus’ birth. In the four weeks of Advent, therefore, the meaning of the coming of the Messiah shifts from the

expectation of the consummation of history itself to preparation for the Nativity of the Savior.

The development of the Advent season in the Church's year was gradual; it seems to have had its beginnings in the fourth century:

While we may be sure that the Advent season developed first outside of Rome, to say more than that is not as easy as one might wish. . . . A canon of the Council of Saragozza (Spain) in 380 urges the constant presence of the faithful in church during a period of twenty-one continuous days, beginning from December 17 and reaching to Epiphany.²

This may help explain our current practice of a more intensive preparation for Christmas from December 17 with the praying of the O Antiphons. It is significant that those dates of December 17–23 also corresponded with the dates of a popular pagan festival, the Saturnalia, which the pastors of the ancient Church may have been trying to counteract. Interestingly, in later centuries Advent was longer than the current four-week season: seventh- and eighth-century Missals provide for six Sundays of Advent.

Above all, at Advent the Church wishes to focus the faithful on the Christ-Event, the appearance in our midst of the Incarnate Son of God, first humbly at Bethlehem and then at the end of time in glory to complete his saving work for the human family. Advent then is a joyful season, full of the expectation of these various comings of our Redeemer by which he manifests his boundless love for his creatures.

Reflections

I.

"I will raise up for David a just shoot."
(Jer 33:15)

The dominant motif of this beautiful season can be captured in three words: promise, hope, and expectation. We read in this season's liturgies the ancient promises and prophecies of salvation in the Old Testament, especially from the Prophet Isaiah. We do this in order to rekindle our hope in the faithfulness of God, who realized many of these promises in the first coming of Christ and will bring them to a glorious fulfillment in the second coming of Christ in glory at the end of time.

Promise was a keynote of Israelite faith. No matter how often the people of God were unfaithful, God always held out hope for salvation. This promise and hope was especially focused on a descendant of King David:

In those days, in that time, I will raise up for David a
just shoot; he shall do what is right and just in the land.
In those days Judah shall be safe. (Jer 33:15–16)

Even when Jerusalem was under siege or destroyed, and the people were brought into captive slavery, their trust in God's faithfulness and his promise of a Messiah endured:

Bethlehem . . .

From you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel;
Whose origin is from of old,
from ancient times.

(Therefore the Lord will give them up, until the time
when she who is to give birth has borne. . . .)

He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock

by the strength of the LORD,
in the majestic name of the LORD, his God;
And they shall remain, for now his greatness
shall reach the ends of the earth;
he shall be peace. (Mi 5:1–4)

Devout Jews preserved these hopes and expectations, and their faith nourishes ours, as we re-read so many of these promises in this special season when we prepare again to celebrate the birth of Christ.

2.

“We also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Phil 3:20)

Christ was the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel. The angel Gabriel told Mary that her son “will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:33). He was the true Messianic King. As always is the case in God’s dealing with us, the realization far exceeded the expectation. The Messiah was not just a royal descendant of King David, but the very Son of God come as Universal Savior.

Jesus’ humble existence and his ministry were an initial fulfillment of all these promises, but he promised a yet greater fulfillment when at the end of time he would return in power and glory to bring the Father’s plan for history to its final fulfillment. He predicted: “they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (Lk 21:27).

The first Christians lived by these promises and this expectation. As Paul wrote in one of the earliest books of the New Testament:

You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to await his Son from heaven, whom he raised from [the] dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the coming wrath. (1 Thes 1:9–10)

A frequent prayer of early Christians was “Come Lord Jesus.” The New Testament even preserves it in the Aramaic language in which they prayed it: *Marana tha* (1 Cor 16:22). Earnestly they looked for Jesus’ return:

We also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body by the power that enables him also to bring all things into subjection to himself. (Phil 3:20–21)

3.

“Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy.”
(Lk 21:34)

Unfortunately, with the passage of time the expectant spirit of the earliest Christians diminished. St. Luke saw it already in the churches to whom he ministered, warning them in the Lord’s words:

Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap. . . . Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man. (Lk 21:34–36)

The Advent season is a call for us to renew this sense of hopeful expectation. It is perhaps the spark that modern evangelization needs in order to enkindle a sense of confidence and enthusiasm for the good news of Jesus Christ.

It is sad that too many Christians settle down into a more or less morose, cynical, depressed attitude that is far from the spirit of the early Church. Their attitude is perhaps best expressed in the comment, “Blessed are those who expect nothing—they will not be disappointed.” True Christians live in constant expectation and know that the realization of God’s promises will always exceed all of our expectations.

One modern prophetic voice has eloquently expressed the need for a revival of our Advent hope:

Expectation has never ceased to guide the progress of our faith like a torch. The Israelites were constantly expectant, and the first Christians too. Christmas, which might have been thought to turn our gaze towards the past, has only fixed it further in the future. The Messiah, who appeared for a moment in our midst, only allowed himself to be seen and touched for a moment before vanishing once again, more luminous and ineffable than ever, into the depths of the future. He came. Yet now we must expect him—no longer a small chosen group among us, but all men—once again and more than ever. The Lord Jesus will only come soon if we ardently expect him. It is an accumulation of desire that should cause the Pleroma to burst upon us. Successors to Israel, we Christians have been charged with keeping the flame of the desire ever alive in the world. Only twenty centuries have passed since the Ascension. What have we made of our expectancy? A certain pessimism, perhaps encouraged by an exaggerated conception of the original fall, has led us to regard the world as decidedly and incorrigibly wicked. And so we have allowed the flame to die down in our sleeping hearts. We persist in saying that we keep vigil in expectation of the Master. But in reality we should have to admit, if we were sincere, that we no longer expect anything. The flame must be revived at all costs. At all costs we must renew in ourselves the desire and the hope for the great Coming.³