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ADVENT

By Gerard Moore

Chapter 5 taken from *Earth Unites with Heaven: An Introduction to the Liturgical Year*. Northcote, Victoria: Morning Star Publishing, 2014, pp 33-35. Used with permission.

The season of advent signals to the faithful that Christmas is approaching. In doing this it also reveals the deeper liturgical understanding of the celebration of the nativity, providing a theological and spiritual reference point for the many cultural, social and devotional meanings and practices attached to this joyous feast.

There are two themes underpinning Advent. The first is the mystery of the incarnation. Christ, the light, has come into our world and dwelt among us as one like us, fully human and yet fully divine: *And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory* (Jn 1:14). The second is that Christ will return and complete the renewal of all things in grace. The sense is that our celebration of the incarnation fills us with hope as we await with anticipation his definitive coming when the entire creation is taken up into the full glory of God. The season reflects a wonderful play on words that we find at the close of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where the translation reads: *Our Lord, come!* (1 Cor 16:22). Yet the text is ambiguous and either can mean 'the Lord has come' or be an invitation to the Lord to come. This double sense is captured in Advent.

THE ORIGINS OF ADVENT

There are a number of aspects to the history of Advent that allow us to understand its current form. The name comes from the Latin verb 'to come to', *advenire*. The term *adventus* was well established in pagan Roman religion to refer to the annual visit of a god to his or her shrine to be present to the people and was quickly taken up by Christian theologians to convey belief in the incarnation and second coming of Christ.

There is evidence from the late fourth century that in parts of Gaul the custom was to hold baptisms during Christmas, and consequently the weeks leading up to time were given over to baptismal preparation. This is our first hint in the development of the season of Advent and gave the time a slightly penitential character since it involved fasting, prayer and self reflection. Some two centuries later the season was established in the city of Rome. However, there it was not related to baptism, and so the penitential aspects were not present. Rather the celebrations were focused on the feast of the incarnation and joyful anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ. Nevertheless, during December in Rome there was a fast in preparation for the olive harvest, and so the month had something of a penitential flavour. In sum, we can see here the origins of our current focus on waiting and expectation, as well as the muted penitential spirit that is part of our sense of the season.

The mention of the olive harvest is a reminder that Advent coincided with the onset of winter, the shortening of the days, the coming of difficult and dangerously cold weather, and a general sense of the precariousness of life and the power of death. All these are at play in the spirituality of the season but make this liturgical period somewhat difficult to embrace when celebrated outside the northern hemisphere.

THE FOUR WEEKS OF ADVENT

The four weeks that make up the season are divided along the two emphases. The readings and prayers for period from the First Sunday up until the 16th of December lead us to meditate the second coming of Christ. The Preface for this time says it well: *Now we watch for the day, hoping that the salvation promised us will be ours when Christ our Lord will come again in glory* (Preface of Advent I). Across the three year cycle the Gospel reading for the first Sunday reminds us to stay awake because our salvation is near at hand. The Gospels for the Second and Third Sundays speak of John the Baptist and his message that salvation is immanent. The first readings on these Sundays deal with prophecies of the coming of the messiah, and are taken mainly from the prophet Isaiah, though Jeremiah, Baruch and Zephaniah are called upon in Year C. The second readings carry themes that fit the meaning of Advent. The readings for the weekdays feature prominently the prophet Isaiah, with his promises of the salvation that will come.

From December 16th the focus is directly on the celebration of the Nativity. Again we find this clearly in the preface: *In his love Christ has filled us with joy as we prepare to celebrate his birth, so that when he comes he may find us watching in prayer, our hearts filled with wonder and praise* (Preface of Advent II). Each of the Gospel readings in the three year Sunday cycle prepares us for the birth of the Lord. Similarly, the weekday Gospels are concerned with the events that led up to the nativity, while the texts for the first reading open up a series of Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the messiah. The season closes with morning Mass on Christmas Eve.

The liturgical colour for Advent is violet, signifying a combination of preparation, penitence and expectation. Often blue is used, moving away from the penitential aspects and looking into the sense of the depth of night which will give way to reveal the coming of salvation.

ADVENT DEVOTIONS

The most popular Advent devotion is the wreath containing four candles, one for each of the Sundays leading up to Christmas. There can be variations in the number of candles, but the sense is to mark the time until the birth of Christ, and all the celebrations and gifts that follow. Wreathes and candles carry a strong sense of a season entering more deeply into winter, and a community looking to break the hold of darkness and the cold. The sense of the second coming of Christ seemingly has not found a devotional base.