

1st Sunday of Advent (A)

27th November 2022

'The new liturgical year: going round in circles?'

Is 2: In the days that are to come ...

Ps 121:

Rom 13: *wake up now: our salvation is even nearer ...*

Mt 24: *stay awake ... stand ready because the Son of Man is coming ...*

It's Advent, starting today, the special pre-Christmas season. But where are the blessed couple, Mary & Joseph; why aren't the shepherds, kings, camels, donkeys, sheep ... oh, and the star of Bethlehem, making their appearance? Yes, Advent is 'getting ready for Christmas,' but those characters — the Holy Family, the holy visitors, the holy animals — won't get much of a look-in for quite a few weeks to come, ... in fact, not really until the final octave beginning 17th Dec, along with the 4th Sunday of Advent. Prior to that we have the first 3 weeks of Advent: a rather different feel, a properly *preparatory* season, and one filled with longing. We *wait with hope*, and this is what should make the season especially beautiful, rather than just some sort of pre-celebrated, long-drawn-out Christmas.

We find that this 1st Sunday of Advent's theme is almost indistinguishable from end-of-year themes. What I mean is, that the end of one Church year 'dovetails' nicely

into the start of the next. In the 33rd/34th Sundays/wks of OT, we considered themes such as: the End of Time, the Last Judgment, the Second Coming of Christ, His glorious Kingship. Well, guess what? Here we are, a new Church year begun, and we have a Gospel reading about judgment, "one taken, another left," and the sudden return of Christ, "the Son of Man coming at an hour you do not expect," so "stay awake ... stand ready." It all sounds remarkably similar to what we've just had and just finished. Where's the new beginning, where's the *fresh start* to our liturgical year? The start does seem very like the end! Yes, it's true, there is a sense of continuity as the end of one Church year merges into the new. Before we prepare specifically for celebrating the 1st Coming of Jesus, we reflect that His 2nd Coming means that *we also* are learning to wait, to long, and to hope: that's what this 1st period of Advent is about (and it will involve a lot of Isaiah, the great prophet of waiting). The 2nd period of Advent will be about St John the Baptist, and the call to repentance. Only then, 17th Dec+ will we get to angels, shepherds, stars and Bethlehem.

So, if the Church year has this annual cycle, where one season more-or-less merges/dovetails into another, might one be justified in claiming that we are ‘going round in circles’? No, not at all. The pagan view of history is often cyclical, and in antiquity pagan cultures had a sense that the universe was static, steady-state, unchanging, going round and round, ... which led often to a sense of purposelessness, and lack of progress. Some claim that this is the very reason that ancient pagan civilizations, though advanced in some ways, never progressed further scientifically because of a fatalist view of the cosmos and of history. But this is not so in what was revealed by God to the Jews — and therefore to us as Christians: the universe, and history is not static and cyclical, but has a beginning, a middle, and an end; it has a direction, and a purpose. God created *ex nihilo* the universe for His own kind purposes; mankind, and His salvation in Christ has its proper place in that complex history, and the End of Time, the Second Coming, the Last Judgment, and the Final Resurrection, awaits the world and humanity.

So, no, the Church’s annual cycle is not simply a ‘circular history,’ in which we get nowhere and end up back where we started. I think of the Church’s year as more like a helix, or corkscrew: yes, it takes us round the seasons, but at the same time directing us forward, like a boat’s propeller. Our celebrating annually the various feasts and seasons in regular fashion does not leave us unmoved, but actually draws us forward spiritually, inching us towards the blessed destiny that is God’s purpose for us. So, as Advent begins each year, we should be very happy that we are another year nearer heaven: the Lord who once came, will come again to complete His salvation, and call us even more fully into His Kingdom. If we take that analogy of the helix, or screw-propeller again, if it’s not too irreverent, it’s only if we stop that active motion of living the cycle of Christian seasons and Christian mysteries, that we find ourselves stuck, stopped from going forward, in the doldrums. The Church’s year carries her people forward in the direction of the King of the Cosmos, the Lord of History, and not ‘round in circles’!

How, then, should we greet this new Church year, this Advent season; how take ourselves forward in deepening love for the Saviour? I have a few ideas:

1. **Isaiah.** The great prophet of Advent, bringing a historical sense of the real moving forward / unfolding of God's plan, is Isaiah. All the 1st readings of Advent Sundays this year are from Isaiah — he has much to say to us as we celebrate the 4 full wks of the season. But there's so much to say, I'll leave it till my Thurs talk (6.10, a 'short talk before dinner.')
2. **“Waiting/hoping/longing.”** These, I feel, are the key words for Advent. It is a season with a palpable sense of 'longing.' Much as a small child has such eager anticipation for his/her birthday (How long and slow the wait!) so, that's us in Advent, waiting with keen longing, just wanting the birth of Christ to come! ... but *willing* to wait, to experience the suspense, the heart expanding as it patiently allows God to fulfil His will “when the fullness of time had come.” It's not easy to wait in Advent, when the world is celebrating 'Christmas' (so to speak) all December long, but as Christians we can certainly do our best in the circumstances not entirely to lose a sense of this precious and beautiful season. Let's consciously think of ourselves as *in Advent*,

and not 'in Christmas' till Christmas comes on the night of the 24th. Of course, the end of term demands some celebrations — we'll have ours at NH this coming Friday evening, and it's right that we be together in joy and thanksgiving for the term we've had — but as best we can, even so, let's keep *Advent as Advent*, a time of preparation and waiting.

3. **Prayer** ... is always the key, isn't it, to entering fully into any season with real faith? Again, with the end of term approaching, and significant deadlines for essays and other projects and assignments, it's not an easy time of year — but then neither is any time of year! Set yourself a little task, though, to keep for Advent. Maybe it's to make a better effort to attend some **extra weekday Mass** in these Advent weeks, especially as term eases off. A very special event for Advent is our **Carol Service**, which takes place on Monday 5th Dec, at the lovely church of the Assumption about 20 mins' walk from here near Piccadilly Circus. Carol services might be rather a specifically British ceremony, so let me just explain that the service is *not* Mass, but is a sequence of music (carols), and readings, both Scripture and other, that allows us to reflect prayerfully on the Word of God, and in

song, on the message of Christmas coming. I really urge you to get it in your heads, in your diaries, in your phones, so as to ensure that such a wonderful occasion of prayer for us this Advent is well attended: **5th Dec, 7pm**, open to all, friends, Catholic or otherwise. It's very beautiful — don't miss it!

4. **Fasting.** Fasting? Really? Well, maybe ... Advent is different to Lent, without question. The purple of Advent is not the same purple of preparation in *penitence* that we put on in Lent and 'give something up' as a matter of course. No — the purple of Advent is the purple of preparation in *expectation*, longing and hope. In fact, in the Ambrosian rite (Milan) they keep a 6-week Advent, but they actually specify a different liturgical purple (mauve) to that of Lent (deep violet) to show the difference in the 'feel' of the two seasons. Nevertheless, I learnt the other day at the Ukrainian-rite Cathedral that they keep a 40-day Advent called the "St Philip's fast," the *Pylypivka*, beginning on Nov 15th; so Eastern-rite Catholics certainly do see fasting as a part of Advent. I've decided that I will give up something in Advent, namely watching dramas on *iPlayer* at the end of the day, as it usually makes me late to bed; and more importantly I wish to replace it with some Advent reading.

So, whatever approach you take to 'fasting' in Advent, maybe think of finding some simple **spiritual reading** to do across these 4 weeks ahead. Our free Advent reflection book, *Always Starting Over*, that you'll receive after Mass would be a good place to start — a title that refers, as I said at the start, to this new beginning that builds on all that the previous Church year had brought us to, yet acknowledges that we must let the love for Jesus draw us ever on.

5. **Confession.** Advent is a season that is highly suited to making proper time for Confession, whether that's here in London before the Christmas vacation, or once you have gone away for Christmas (if you are). Fr Ivano and I will keep to our usual slots for Confession (Sunday 6–7pm and Monday 6–7pm) right up to Mon 12th Dec. I'm always willing to be asked, or e-mailed, for an appointment for Confession, too, and will make time for that, for you. It's not always possible on the spur of the moment, but sometimes it is. I have made multiple copies of a sheet for Confession preparation; available in the lobby (purple sheet), if you need some help in getting ready for Confession.
6. **Giving.** I'll leave that to Sr Carolyn to announce ...

Rom 13:11–12: "It is full time now for you to wake from sleep."