

First Sunday of Advent

December 2, 2012

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalm 25:1-10

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

In a quiet table in the back of the White Horse Tavern in Cambridge, England, a group of intellectuals gathered to talk about the issues of the day. Thomas Cranmer, the architect of our Book of Common Prayer, was among those academics who shaped the Protestant English Reformation. I imagine that the discussion among these young men was not always quiet, for they were discussing – no arguing – matters of the heart and soul, as well as the mind.

During the Reformation some Protestants de-emphasized many Christian holy days and seasons. And the church became disconnected from the rhythms of the church year. But some Reformation churches, like the Anglican church, kept Advent. Could it be that Thomas Cranmer's liturgical movement is why we live into the Anglican thumps of the church year again and again each year – beginning with Advent? Some have said that the season of Advent is a gift from Thomas Cranmer. Is that why must we wait for Christmas?

Why do we wait throughout Advent for Christ to come? We know that he is already here. So why not celebrate his birth right now at the beginning of Advent? Why not have dessert first? Why wait?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said “Advent is a time of waiting.” Our whole life is an Advent, really – “a time of waiting for the ultimate, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, when all people are brothers and sisters” united in the joy of the peace that we have been promised. So we must “learn to wait, because [Christ] has promised to come.”¹

We know that Advent is the beginning of the church year. And Christmas is right around the corner once we begin greening the church with the Advent wreath. We sing the great song O, Come...O, Come quickly, Lord. And Emmanuel is coming. But our festive Christmas decorations will have to wait while we wait, because Advent is a penitential time in the church year. Yes, it is, but less so than Lent. We think of Advent more as a time of expectant hope. So we wait, perhaps not so patiently. Every year we wait for Christ to come again into our hearts, to be reborn in us, to make us new.

If we celebrate the real meaning of Advent, then, we will treat this season of preparation for Christ coming again not as an early extension of Christmas, but rather as a time when we are blessed to rediscover why we wait.

The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus* for coming. The Greek word is *parousia* – a reference to the Second coming of Christ. For us the season of Advent anticipates the coming of Christ from two very different perspectives. First we share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, and we also must be alert for his Second coming.

The Prophet Isaiah spoke of the great light that would shine in the darkness (Isaiah 9:2) and of the child for whom we wait, the son to be given to us named “Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). The one for whom we wait is the one “who is and who was and who is to come” as the Revelation to John (1:4) states. The spirit of Advent is expressed so well in the parable of the bridesmaids who anxiously awaited the coming of the Bridegroom (Matthew 25:1-13).

Advent has evolved in the spiritual life of the Church. It is hard to pinpoint the historical origins of the celebration with any precision. In France, the earliest form of Advent was a time of preparation for the feast of Epiphany when converts were baptized, much as Lent was a preparation with emphasis on prayer and fasting. At first Advent was three weeks long but then was expanded to 40 days. In the year 380 the local church

Council of Saragossa in Spain established a three-week fast before Epiphany. In 581 the local Council of Macon, France, designated that from November 11th (the Feast of St. Martin of Tours) until Christmas was to be a time of fasting on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. These practices spread to England. In Rome, the Advent preparation did not appear until the 6th century as a less penitential time of preparation for Christmas. The Church formalized the celebration of Advent by providing prayers, antiphons, readings, and responses for five Sundays of Advent. Pope St. Gregory reduced the number of Sundays in Advent to four. And finally around the 9th century the first Sunday in Advent became the beginning of the Church year.

Most denominations now have incorporated Advent into their worship services to varying degrees as a reaction to the excesses of secular Christmas values. In our secular culture and even in some non-catholic churches, Christmas is an isolated day. For us Anglicans, Christmas is a festival of the incarnation and a season of the church year that includes much more than one day of celebration; Christmas then is much more than one day of generous gifting to loved ones as well as people in need.

Now we could say that the secular world celebrates Christmas for more than one day. Why Christmas decorations and merchandising and advertising began to appear before Halloween this year here in Calgary. But all the excesses of Christmas gifting culminates on the one day, December 25th. We too, here at St. Andrew's, will take part in the planning and gifting through our angel tree. The reality is that providing for the children of someone who is incarcerated takes planning, and, so we work ahead to provide gifts for this family. Laurie Bennie – who works with the Prison Fellowship Ministry – will give us more information about our family for whom we will be angels this year at the end of our service today. She also will be available downstairs for questions.

We Anglicans believe that Christmas can only be understood after preparing ourselves during Advent. The season of Advent, the time leading up to Christmas, that always

includes four Sundays, gives us a welcome solace from the commercial world's understanding of Christmas. We have the opportunity to re-orient ourselves to God's will during Advent. We have the opportunity to wait for the true meaning of Christmas – the incarnation of God's Son.

We thank you, Lord, for the gift of the time to wait for the Christ child to come to us again. May we wait patiently for Christmas this year. And may we be reborn again this year as we wait for Christ.

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), *A Testament to Freedom: the essential writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Geoffrey B. Kelly, F. Burton Nelson, eds., HarperCollins, 1995, p. 186.