

## Advent is...

Have you ever gone on a long drive to a place that you've never been before? Did it feel like it took forever to reach your final destination? Have you ever repeated that trip or returned home and found that the journey didn't seem so long once you knew where you were going? Knowing our destination seems to make our travels swifter or more bearable, even if length of time and distance do not change. There is something about knowing where we are going that quickens our step, fuels our desire, and sets our minds and hearts in a forward direction.

The Season of Advent places before us our destination as a pilgrim Church. The Christian community is on a journey to the heavenly kingdom. Our journey may, therefore, seem long and tiring. But, if we reflect a little bit more on our Christian experience, perhaps we have already experienced something about our final destination that makes it more familiar than previously imagined.

Throughout the four weeks of Advent, the prayer of the Church, the Scripture readings, ritual gestures and symbols, and our celebration of Eucharist hold before us our destination. It is not a geographical location, but a person: Jesus Christ. We believe that he has ushered in the Reign of God through his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension. Jesus is the one we have come to know by his presence among us two thousand years ago and his continued presence among us through the power of the Holy Spirit. He is our final destination because he will present us to the Father at the end of time, but he also encourages us on our journey as he travels the road with us through his gracious Spirit.

Advent enables the faithful to enter more deeply into the mystery of our destination by celebrating the Christ who strengthens our steps: as we remember the events leading up to his first coming into the world; as we bid him to come into our lives today through his powerful Spirit; and as we long for his coming in glory at the end of time bringing the fullness of the Kingdom promised to us.

Advent is...waiting in joyful hope!

Every time we pray the *Our Father* at Mass, the priest continues with a prayer that concludes with the words: “protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.” Our Christian belief promises that Jesus Christ will come again in glory at the end of time. Our lives should be marked by joy and hope, not fear, as we wait for the Lord’s return.

The four-week season of Advent celebrates this anticipated mystery of Christ’s return and gives us the vision we need to live as disciples who eagerly await the Lord’s coming. In the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar*, Advent is partially described as: “a season that...directs the mind and heart to await Christ’s Second Coming at the end of time.”<sup>1</sup> The Church’s worship during the first two weeks of Advent fans our desire for the Lord’s return through the prayers, readings and hymns that make up our liturgical celebrations. For example, we hear in the Advent I Preface prayed at Mass from the First Sunday of Advent to the 16<sup>th</sup> of December: “Now we watch for the day, hoping that the salvation promised us will be ours when Christ our Lord will come again in his glory.”<sup>2</sup>

Like the wise handmaidens awaiting the bridegroom (see Matt. 25:1-5), the followers of Christ are reminded to keep vigilant and alert as we await the Lord’s return. Through prayer, spiritual reading, acts of charity, and participation in Eucharist, we keep our souls aflame with Christ’s love. The celebration of Advent helps us to expand the meaning and vision of our lives, so that we are not ends in ourselves, but a people who seek Christ as our hopeful end and joyful fulfilment.

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<sup>1</sup> *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar*, #39 in The Roman Missal: Sacramentary. (Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1983), p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 427.

## Advent is...Preparation!

We only know about the promise of Christ's return because he has already dwelt among us. Though fully divine, he became fully human for our sake, being born over two thousand years ago in Bethlehem to the Virgin Mary. We remember this wonderful event, the Incarnation, with jubilant celebration each year at Christmas. Advent is not only a time to prepare for the Second Coming, but also a time to prepare our hearts to celebrate the mystery of the birth of Our Lord: his First Coming.

The *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar* states that Advent is also “a time of preparation for Christmas when the first coming of God's Son to men is recalled.”<sup>3</sup> We notice that in the third and fourth weeks of Advent, the prayers and readings in the liturgy shift from a focus on the end of time to a focus on the immediacy of our personal response to the message of the Gospel and, especially after December 16<sup>th</sup>, to the events that led up to the birth of Jesus Christ.

In our North American culture, keeping Advent as a time of preparation to celebrate Christmas is very difficult. It seems that as soon as the costumes are put away from Halloween, Christmas arrives in full force! From mid-November to December 24<sup>th</sup>, we are bombarded with holiday advertisements. Christmas music starts to increase exponentially on the radio. The season of Advent seems to be experienced by most of us as less a preparation for Christmas and more like Christmas itself, so much so by the time the 25<sup>th</sup> of December rolls around, we're exhausted and ready to chuck out the Christmas tree!

Why not trust the gentle unfolding that Advent gives us as preparation for the Christmas season? Take time to reflect prayerfully on the meaning of Advent by reading and pondering the scripture readings of the day. Is it possible to wait until the week before Christmas to start putting up the Christmas decorations and then leave them up for the whole of the Christmas season? Advent calendars are a wonderful way for children to count down the days until Christmas. Each “door” could be opened in the morning accompanied by this simple prayer: “Come, Lord Jesus, come! Come and open our hearts. Fill us with your love!” There is no need to be dour and solemn during Advent season, after all, it is a time of joyful hope. Perhaps, all we need to do is keep our Christmas preparations in perspective of the reason for it all: the gift of Christ who has already come into the world. May our preparation this Advent put us at joyful service of the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, #39, p. 71.

Advent is...a wreath of evergreens and light!

The Advent wreath is a prominent symbol of the Advent season and is used in our churches and our homes as a way to prayerfully count the four weeks of the liturgical season. It consists of a wreath made of evergreens into which four candles have been placed.

Beginning on the eve of the First Sunday of Advent, the wreath is blessed and one candle is lit to mark the start of the first week of the Advent season. As each week begins, another candle is lit until all four candles are burning brightly by the Fourth Sunday of Advent. According to tradition, three of the candles are purple and one candle is pink, although all four candles may be purple. The pink candle is lit on the Third Sunday of Advent, also known as *Gaudete* Sunday (from the Latin word which means “Rejoice!”), as the focus of the season shifts from the Second Coming of Christ to the First Coming of Christ.

In the northern hemisphere, the days grow shorter at this time of the year, and the trees and plants drop their leaves as they “die back” in preparation for the long winter ahead. The evergreens on the Advent wreath remind us of the everlasting life promised to us by the gift of Jesus Christ, who came among us to save us from sin and death. The lighting of candles banishes the darkness as a reminder of Jesus Christ, the Light who has come into the world through his birth, and who continues to shine brightly through his Church.

Why not create an Advent wreath for your kitchen table? The following blessing may be prayed:

*Lord our God, we praise you for your Son, Jesus Christ:  
he is Emmanuel, the hope of the peoples,  
he is the wisdom that teaches and guides us,  
he is the Saviour of every nation.*

*Lord God, let your blessing come upon us  
as we light the candles of this wreath.  
May the wreath and its light  
be a sign of Christ's promise to bring us salvation.  
May he come quickly and not delay.*

*We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Blessing of an Advent Wreath,” The Roman Ritual: Book of Blessings. (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1989), #1540, p. 657.

## Advent is...O Antiphons!

From December 17, Advent worship shifts in earnest to focus on the events leading up to the birth of Jesus Christ, and the fulfilment of the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah. The scripture readings, prayers during the Mass, and Liturgy of the Hours assign specific texts for each day leading up to Christmas Eve in order to help us to prepare for the celebration of Christmas. The texts are marked with impatience in joyful anticipation of this feast.<sup>5</sup>

One particular and beautiful expression of our eagerness is found in the antiphons which precede the recitation of the *Magnificat* during Evening Prayer throughout this final week of Advent. The *Magnificat* is Mary's expression of praise and glory to God in response to being chosen to be the mother of the Lord (see Luke 1:46-55). It is sung by the Church every evening as the community prays the Liturgy of the Hours. The seven antiphons which precede the *Magnificat* from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December are called the "O Antiphons." They have a long history, "known already at the time of Charlemagne."<sup>6</sup> They call upon God to "Come" by focusing on different aspects of God's saving action throughout history and God's power to save by sending the Messiah. By praying them, we unite our voices and hearts in the desire for the Lord to come, so that we may be renewed in the hope given to us through the birth of Jesus Christ: the Lord who has come into the world.

The O Antiphons will seem familiar to us because they are the basis of the chant "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" which is traditionally sung during the season of Advent.

The seven "O Antiphons" are:

- ❖ December 17: O Wisdom, O holy Word of God, you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care. Come and show your people the way to salvation.
- ❖ December 18: O sacred Lord of ancient Israel, who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush, who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain: come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.

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<sup>5</sup> Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year. Volume 1: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 163.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

- ❖ December 19: O sacred O Flower of Jesse's stem, you have been raised up as a sign for all peoples; kings stand silent in your presence; the nations bow down in worship before you. Come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid.
- ❖ December 20: O Key of David, O royal Power of Israel controlling at your will the gate of heaven: come, break down the prison walls of death for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death; and lead your captive people into freedom.
- ❖ December 21: O Radiant Dawn, splendour of eternal light, sun of justice: come. Shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.
- ❖ December 22: O King of all the nations, the only joy of every human heart; O Keystone of the mighty arch of man, come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust.
- ❖ December 23: O Emmanuel, king and lawgiver, desire of the nations, Saviour of all people, come and set us free, Lord our God.<sup>7</sup>

The "O Antiphons" can become a simple, yet profound prayer for us in the evenings during the final week of Advent by praying them before and after reciting the *Magnificat* of the Virgin Mary.

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<sup>7</sup> The Liturgy of the Hours. Vol. 1: Advent Season, Christmas Season. (New York, Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975), pp.325 ff.