

Insights in Liturgy

The Real Business of Advent

By FATHER BENEDICT EHMANN

Next Sunday Advent will open its doors to welcome us into another Year of Our Lord. Its business will not be the celebration of Christmas, but to stir up expectation. Its days are to be spent shrewdly, carefully, preparing our minds and hearts for the coming of the

Lord — not only in his birth in Bethlehem when the Old Testament ended, but even more important, in that glorious coming which is still to be, when the New Testament will end.

The Advent days have a double focus: on the child who was born in Bethlehem, and on the Lord who is to return at the end of history.

Exactly like those "watchers and holy ones" of the Old Testament days who poured out their souls in longing for the Messiah who was to come, we are called to be the "watchers and the holy ones" of the New Testament. Who are to pour out our souls in longing for the Lord who is yet to come in his glory to judge the living and the dead. The final page of the Bible ends with the cry, "Come, Lord Jesus." No less than the people B.C., we the people A.D. are looking ahead to the Messiah: they to his first coming, we to his second coming.

This theme should, of course, ring loud and clear at all times. But it is in the Advent season that it rings louder and clearer to rouse us from sleep, to awaken us to stronger expectation of the Lord. This is the proper occupation of Advent. To sound the call, the Church places before us the Old Testament heralds and harbingers of the first coming, especially Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Mary in her expectancy, so that with the aspirations and calls of these great ones sounding within our prayers, we too might enlarge the desires of our hearts for him who is to come again.

This all sounds fine and good and beautiful. But that's not the way it goes today. Advent is in almost total eclipse. The crux of the modern problem is that Christmas is not allowed to stay put any more. The real Christmas should begin on the eve of December 25 and continue for its twelve festal days, until Epiphany (Twelfth Night) on January 6. But the Christmas of the worldlings keeps edging earlier and earlier into December, even into November; and there are signs of it right after Halloween. From then on, it's Christmas business with a bang, parties and carolling and shopping seven days a week. Yes, Advent is just about in total eclipse.

How unfortunate, even heartbreaking, for anyone who has learned to appreciate the precious value of Advent! And I don't think it's a rabid judgment to say that this extinction of Advent plays trump cards right into the devil's hand: for his game, let's remember, is not only to lead us into evil, but also to interfere with what is good. The fact that this sabotaging of Advent is not either deliberate or malicious makes no difference to the devil: he is content with the sabotage. Advent is blacked out, its trumpet sounds a feeble call, Christian folk are too stampeded into the pre-Christmas rush and revelry to give time to the prophets of the ancient waiting, or to go into the desert with John the Baptist and into the silence of the expectant Mary. The devil wins the game with hardly an effort.

But we must still sound the Advent call to those who can hear it above all the noise. It is the call to lift up our hearts with the prophets and John the Baptist and Mary, to dilate our whole being for the Lord's coming to us. This is the yearning for God which Jesus beatified in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blest are they who hunger and thirst after justice." This "justice" is not simply equity, but the whole range of God's grace and self-surrender.

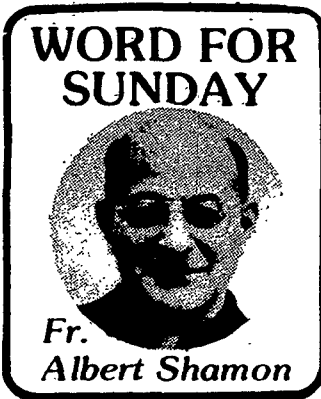
Christians must be a waiting people, waiting for the coming of the Lord — his daily coming in grace and word and sacrament, his final coming at the end of time. We pray as the Lord taught us, "Thy kingdom come." We are the servants of the parable who are placed over the Master's goods to work until he comes back "like a thief in the night." We are the ten bridesmaids waiting for the Bridegroom's return: when he comes at midnight, some will be ready to greet him with lamps burning, but others will be without oil for their lamps.

Let the devout and ob-servant Christian take time during Advent to climb the watchtowers of Israel, spend time with the watchmen and put the ancient question, "Watchman, what of the night?" As he nourishes his heart in the hope of the Lord's coming in the prayers and biblical readings of the Advent liturgies, he will offer himself to work for the kingdom's coming in the wasteland and desert of contemporary society; he will work diligently until the Master's return; he will trumpet the Advent call: "Awake, sleeper, and arise from among the dead, and Christ will enlighten thee." (Eph. 5:14) Sincerely

occupied with the business of Advent, he will "walk with care, not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of (his) time, because the days are evil." (Eph. 5:15,16) He will truly sense what it means to "wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ."

GIFT SUGGESTION

Corpus Christi School is selling various kinds of candy suggested as gifts for Thanksgiving, Chanukah and Christmas. The school children are competing for prizes, many of them given by local merchants, but anyone who wishes to order through the school may call 325-5850.



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mt. 24:37-44. (R1) Is. 2:1-5. (R2) 13:11-14.

Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent.

In the readings one word rings out at least eight times. It is the word "come." Advent means "a coming." Isaiah spoke of "days to come" (R1); and our Lord of "the coming of the Son of Man" (R3).

The comings of the Lord are many.

In the past He came gentle as a lamb and was judged unjustly by men — the Christ of history.

In the present He comes in multitudinous ways: in His word, in the Eucharist, in grace — the Christ of mystery.

In the future, he will come in great power to judge men justly — the Christ of majesty.

During Advent the Church contemplates one or other of the three comings of the Lord.

St. Paul in the second reading focuses on the present — the now-time, the time in between Christ's first and last coming. Paul says, "Wake up!" — an echo of Christ's "Stay awake!" Sleep is a blessed thing, but not when you are supposed to be awake. A guard asleep on duty can cause a city to fall. One asleep on the job may lose it. People asleep are not aware of what is going on around them; whereas people awake are.

Paul said, "Wake up!" Wake up morally. As one getting from bed casts aside the bedclothes, so Paul urges Christians to lay aside the works of darkness: drunkenness, sexual excess, quarreling, jealousy. These are called "works of darkness" because formerly people were ashamed to do them in daylight and did them only at night — so contrary are they to the light of reason and faith.

Long before Paul, our Lord almost frantically shouted out to His followers, "Stay awake!" His urgency was based on the fact that there is a judgment and judgment means separation. Good and bad will be separated, and for eternity! "Of two men," Christ said, "one will be taken to heaven, the other will not. Of two women, it will be the same. Therefore, do not repeat the unconcern of people in Noah's day. Before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and being married." What's wrong with that, you say? Actually nothing. However, when eating and drinking, marrying and being married become the sole preoccupations of man, ah, then that is a totally different matter. How terrible for those with a destiny beyond the stars to settle only for the transitory earthly life! To do so, is not to be with it, not to be awake; in fact, it means being asleep!

Staying awake is urgent for Christians not because they do not have a lasting city here, but because man does not know exactly when his sojourn here will end. One thing certain is that it will end; what is uncertain is when. The end will come suddenly, unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. The tragedy would be to be caught napping, off guard, asleep — for eternity is at stake.

Life is short, and death is sure. The hour of death remains obscure.

A soul you have: an only one. If that be lost, all hope is gone.

Waste not your time while time shall last; For after death, 'tis ever past.

The all-seeing God your judge shall be;

Of heaven or hell your destiny.

All earthly things will fleet away.

Eternity shall ever stay.

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