

Advent 2021

As you may be aware, this is the beginning of the Liturgical Year for the Catholic Church. And, as with all beginnings, we are given a fresh start. In this case, we have a fresh start in our relationship with Jesus. Now, I don't mean to say that our existing relationship is "bad," only that it can always be better. The Church itself seeks this renewal, as demonstrated by changing up the liturgy during Mass. For Sunday services, we have gone from the "B" year to the "C" year, while our daily liturgy has moved from the "Year I" to the "Year II" schedule. But while this is the most radical and long-lasting change we see in the Church during Advent, it is also the most discrete. More obvious but temporary changes can be seen in how we celebrate the masses during this time.

We will not recite the "Gloria" during mass this season. The vestments of the priest and altar will be violet for most of this time, signifying we are in a time of prayer and sacrifice. The exception is the third week of the season, when the vestments change to rose to signify joy. This third week is a foretaste of the joy we will have when our waiting is over and the gift will be ours. We also can see a dramatic change in the music; there is a strong sense of longing in it. It reflects the waiting for the fulfillment of a millennia-old promise, as well as our current desire for the promised second coming of Christ. And we also have a change in the theme of the readings. The prophets of the Old Testament rejoice in anticipation of the promise made good, while the Gospels highlight the events that took place just before the promise was fulfilled. But perhaps the most obvious symbol of Advent in Church is the Advent Wreath. The wreath is a circle, representing the eternal nature of God. It is made of evergreen boughs, which promise of a life everlasting. There are three violet and one rose colored candles to match the vestments, each one representing a week of the season.

All of these changes have one thing in common: anticipation of a great gift! This is the same anticipation a family expecting a new baby to be born will have. As well it should be, as this is literally what is happening. We are preparing to welcome a new brother into our family.

But I think, since we know how this story ends, we tend to become complacent about this wonderful gift. It is easy to simply see the hope and expectation of the Hebrews as a historical curiosity, and take for granted the second coming of Christ.

But our complacency, if not justified, is at least understandable. We have been blessed in growing up in a culture where this gift has been so intertwined with our daily lives that it is only with great and deliberate effort that we can appreciate what this gift really means. Even with our best efforts, I doubt we can ever fully understand all that this gift means to us. But we can take this time of Advent to try. Today, I want to focus on just three aspects of this gift that I hope will help in this process.

The first aspect I want to address is one I just mentioned: the gift of brotherhood. In almost every culture in the history of the world, everything centered around one's own family. Other families only mattered in terms of how they could help or hurt one's own family. Short-term agreements would be made between families as long as it was mutually beneficial. Families might share an animosity between them for generations after a slight, real or perceived, was forgotten. We see this in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. If two families wanted a long-lasting relationship, or to peacefully end a feud, then two families had to become one through the marriage of their children. But Jesus gives us the gift of universal brotherhood. We are all united in one big family through Jesus. One way to help anticipate this gift is to realize we have a new opportunity to renew our family ties with the rest of mankind.

The second aspect is that we have a God that has given us a name and image of Himself. Our Jewish ancestors did not have this. The first and second laws of the Ten Commandments, at least as understood by the Hebrews, prohibited this. God's name is recorded in scripture as being known to Moses, but it was never written down. Instead, we have what is believed to be the consonants of God's name ("YHWY"). The Hebrews never attempted to guess what the vowels might be, and instead referred to God by various titles, such as "God Most High" and "Lord." Also, the Jewish fear of making an idolatrous image of God was so severe that they are the only known culture from antiquity that left no visual artistic legacy behind. But in a few weeks, we will be given a name *and* an image of our God: the name of Jesus and the image of man. Two ways we can appreciate the greatness of this gift is to realize just how much we rely on the name Jesus Christ, as well as the images we have of Him and the saints, particularly the crucifixion. I'm not suggesting we should try to worship without them, I'm just saying to be aware of how different and alien our worship would be without them. I suspect most people would feel a lot more distant from God, and this leads to my last point.

The third aspect I want to address is the magnitude of this gift. There was no Kingdom of Heaven for us before the gift. All the dead went to Sheol, although the righteous were comfortable there while the unrighteous were in torment. We see this in Jesus's own words when He told us of the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man. It wasn't until Jesus went into Hell (as mentioned in the Apostles Creed) to rescue them that the Kingdom of Heaven became available to us. Before this gift, man and God were separated both in life and in death. With the gift, God and man were forever united, although imperfectly in this life. We now have a time to not only contemplate this wonderful union, but also to anticipate an even better one in Heaven.

Advent is a time for us to reflect on how incomplete our lives really are, how much we are lacking. The better we can understand how incomplete we are, the more we realize how wonderful this gift really is. And the more wondrous this gift is, the better we can appreciate it when we get it on Christmas Day.

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