

Advent Scripture

understanding the season

One of the ways of approaching the Scriptures is the head-on method we have employed in the Scripture Course you've been following. In the parish it may not be appropriate to do this for people who have no background in study or theological thinking. Instead, it is worth following the movement of the Liturgy, relating people to the season through which they are passing.

There can be little argument about the scriptural study which most helps people to appreciate the spirit of Advent. The forward-looking tonality of the time, its focus on the second coming of Christ, naturally indicates the primacy of the prophets and particularly of the prophet Isaiah. The further element of futurology which occurs is that of Jewish Apocalyptic writing, which fills the Lectionary in the last week of Ordinary time - the week of Christ the King - and is very much present in the liturgical texts of the Advent Missal.

To give a liturgical overview of Advent is not as easy as people think. I regularly hear that Advent is a time of preparation for Christmas; the impression of a sort of winter Lent is easy to assume (both violet periods before a massive feast). But Advent is quite different from Lent. It is not, in itself, a penitential season, calling on us to take up the Lenten trident of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. These realities belong to the Church always, and therefore to the Advent Church. But the prime quality of Advent is the Christian virtue of *hope*; it is the season of hope.

Looking Forward

Looking forward is so often a real indicator of the quality of the looker. What is it that we set before ourselves, to put our hope in? There are few questions so vital as this, and we can ask it of ourselves first. Life without hope is half dead, and yet there is a deep suspicion or knowledge within us that much of our hope is poorly-placed to provide us with the courage and desire we need to keep voyaging through life. Some people are so radically confused that they tow themselves forward on the promise of the next drink or the next drug-fix. They know they need hope; and knowing of nothing authentic to hope in, they settle for a fake which destroys them.

If we are more blessed than that, our hope is often disseminated between the short term (hoping to get home tonight in time for a good dinner or a television programme) the medium term (hoping for a good holiday in the next six months) and the long term (hoping for a happy retirement or a successful family). The tough thing is that even the longest-term of these hopes are often confined entirely to the world that is passing; and that means that they are perfectly likely to fail in plain terms even to materialise, let alone furnish the hoper with fuel for a lifetime. So what does the term "Christian Hope" mean: and in this context what is "Advent Hope"?

The first thing to say is that Advent is the season *par excellence* of hope, and that it does furnish us with hope that will be sufficient to our living life as it is - to the full, and to the end. It will even give us the means to free ourselves from the poverty of our intermediate hopes, and their frequent failure - that is why the scripture is so often couched in terms of liberation. We are endlessly prone to spiritualise our limited hopes, and the only result is to land us in *religious* crisis when they go unfulfilled. Many a young person, for instance, prays fervently for some successful outcome, and finds faith in ruins when it doesn't come off. What we choose to put our hope in must be sufficiently *in God's hands* for it to survive the disasters which afflict all human plans. In the end, we can hope for God, in all his mystery and ulteriority. That's why the great prayer which recurs in Jesus is "*thy will be done*". This is often set by us in the frame of resignation, as if the rubbishing of our poor hopes is the

main feature of God's design. That is hardly what hope is about. We "resign" our hopes of swimming the Pacific Ocean, in favour of the arrival of a lifeboat. We "resign" our efforts to survive on starvation rations, in favour of a banquet. We "resign" our attempts to ignore our disease or heal ourselves, because we are offered an expert surgery. What are we "resigning" in these cases? In the first, our desperate assumption that no-one will come to our aid. In the second, our wrong assumption that our poverty is immovable. In the third, our bleak assumption that we have to live with increasing pain and disablement, and that nothing can be done to help it.

Genuine hope is, like all the Theological Virtues, not limited. It partakes of the eternal reach of the One to whom it leads. Limited hopes *in their limitation* are not the real thing. So prayer - which is the prime work of hope - takes on the form of a steady refinement of hope, until our prayer is united with the will of God - *thy will be done on earth as in heaven* - and we find ourselves praying that God should be God, and that we should be his obedient creatures, to whom his promises are unquestionably the future for which we could not have hoped by ourselves.

When we look at the Advent lectionary, we find these themes set in a very precise framework. We should familiarise ourselves with it, so that our work with the Liturgy may be in perfect accord with its spirit.

The Morphology Of Liturgical Time

Can we "look forward" to the Incarnation? A variety of responses occurs.

1 If the Incarnation is to be respected, its occurrence in historic time must be respected; because the taking of flesh involves the taking of a certain space, time, and character. In that sense the Incarnation is an event of a specific time and place and, like all human history, it can only be commemorated. This would express the understanding of evangelical Protestants.

2 If God is to be considered as the author of the Incarnation, it is an eternal reality, or part of an eternal reality, which therefore exists beyond the limitation of space and time. It is an eternal fact, it belongs to the eternal life of God, which is never subject to change. This means that it can be considered as not confined to the past, but eternal. It is as if the happenings in Bethlehem (as, indeed, in the Upper Room or on the Cross of Calvary) take their whole meaning from the eternal God; therefore they are experienced by us as eternal truths, not as historically-determined ones. What we celebrate in the death of the Lord is the truth of God, which took flesh in the happenings on the eve of the Passover in the year 30 AD or thereabouts, but which is eternally available to us because it is the truth of the eternal God. That's what Incarnation does, and it's what liturgy does.

3 Within the theology of the Liturgy, which in Catholic understanding is the point of intersection of the timeless with time, the eternal becomes accessible in time. This enables us to commemorate a past event AND simultaneously to participate in the eternal truth which it reveals to us. We experience the earthing of this aspect of God when the Church turns its mind to the celebrating of Christmas.

4 What we do in Advent is to experience the expectation of Israel as illuminating our expectation of the second coming of Jesus Christ. But in a real sense we revisit the time before the birth of Jesus too. In many ways we are still waiting for the encounter with Christ which will save us. In many ways we can still pray for the Incarnation to be displayed to us, as we celebrate it at Epiphany. The incompleteness of our religion enables us to read the prophets in a complex and entirely Christian way, because the arrival of the Eternal in our temporal world has opened it up to such experiences. To put it another way, the recognition of Jesus of Nazareth as God means that his individual actions and encounters form an encounter-point with the eternal. Now, one cannot apprehend the Eternal in a partial way, but

only in its totality; it isn't in the nature of God that we should meet a little God, or a bit of God. Those who visited Jesus in the manger were therefore in the presence of God *tout court*, and their lives were immediately laid open to the understanding of the fulness of Divinity, because their teasing out of the meaning of this birth, of this human child, would lead them at last into the heart of God by a straight road.

But this is precisely how the Liturgy works.

Therefore we set our understanding of the working of Scripture into the same framework. The writings of Isaiah are the Word of God. Insofar as we accept them in this sense, our ears and our understanding are laid open to an encounter with the incarnate Christ, who is God's word. The correct understanding of what the first Isaiah says to us will be to go to the origins of the text, to hear what the prophet wrote and to whom, and to place ourselves in the same context. That this leads us to step into the mode of people looking forward expectantly to the coming of God is in perfect accord with the Christian liturgy. If we read Isaiah correctly, we shall share in the ignorance of the future which he suffered, and listen to his oracles and visions with the same openness of mind which is the mark of the prophet. Our own hope for the coming of God may be more usually experienced in a more defined mould offered by the Christian community, taught by Christ and changed forever by his presence. But in Isaiah we still hear the true word of God, and receive it in the same spirit as those who heard Isaiah. After all, they were receiving the word, and we are receiving the same word, and the word is God. There is only one God, whose word stands in the heavens.

The grand structure of the present book of Isaiah is quite specific. It embodies, in the work of three major contributors, or waves of writing within a single school, over two hundred years of revelatory encounter with God. Such a treasure can never go out of date, or be relegated to the past like some human family's photograph-album.

You will perhaps recall, from previous study, that the first 39 chapters of Isaiah form the kind of classic prophetic writing that emanates from a free Israel, generated as it was from within court circles in Jerusalem. The prophet is a fearless and independent presence in the court. His oracles are stern and critical, even monitory of a doom to be expected in the future.

The second voice is that of the so-called Book of Consolation, which emanates from the time of the Exile. The message has changed, as the author accepts that the worst has now happened, and the punishment which has descended on Israel is now complete. There is no particular call any more for warnings and predictions of disaster; there is no more evil to fear. In addressing his contemporaries, the prophet embarks on a daring project, convincing his people that, far from being worsted in a fight with the gods of Babylon, the God of Israel has displayed his power by sending his people into exile and dispossessing them of Temple, King, and Kingdom. God declares himself totally enthroned over the nations and their gods, over the history of the world and in particular over Israel and her oppressors. What happens to the people happens by God's sovereign will. This startling suggestion is hard for the Israelites to swallow. But it enables Isaiah in consoling the people to insist on their destiny to repent and to learn from their sufferings.

The third Isaiah presents a prospect of restoration to the people. The exiles' return to Jerusalem was far from triumphal. They found heaps of ruins, undefended boundaries, and a fallen nation. The prophet knows he has to lift them up and encourage them with the promise of a new nation. In this the third Isaiah completes the classically-edited shape of the prophetic collections we now read in the Bible, which typically begin with denunciations and threats, move through meditation on desolation and downfall, and end with oracles of hope.

This loosely-described overview of the book of Isaiah also gives us an overview of some of the Advent themes. As we absorb the complexities of the spirit of the season, we must keep

in mind that the Church can never speak of any kind of hope without relating it to her eschatological hope for the kingdom to come. So any loose talk about “preparing for Christmas”, if that is conceived merely as a memorial feast, should be strenuously avoided. It is also dangerous to talk about “preparing for the coming of Baby Jesus”, since that ignores the complexity of the Church’s mode of hoping. “The hope for the Messiah”, for instance, is a perfectly valid way of defining the heart of Advent, since it embraces with complete respect both the expectation of Israel, and the hope of the Church for the end of the world and the inauguration of God’s reign. The Church will meditate on this many-faceted theme of hope for a long time, before allowing herself to turn to the themes of Christmas on December 17th, giving a pre-octave of meditation on the birth-narratives in Matthew and Luke.

So the structure of the four Sundays, each having a range of nine readings over the three-year cycle, is that the first two Sundays clearly speak to us of the Second Coming; the third Sunday, in transitional mode, refers to the joy that is proper to the Messianic Age, and calls us to inherit it as people consecrated to the Kingdom; and the fourth Sunday is frankly devoted to the expectation of the Incarnation.

The first week of Advent could be entitled “vigilant waiting for the Lord”.

The first Sunday proclaims the oncoming end of the world: but the prophetic readings for the most part frame these forebodings in an atmosphere of joy. Notice that the 1st rdg in yr B is from Trito-Isaiah, whereas all the 1st rdgs for the first weekdays of Advent are rigorously restricted to Proto-Isaiah.

The Book of Consolation makes its first appearance in Sunday 2 of year B, a reading which is repeated on the Tuesday of the 2nd week, after which all the weekdays are drawn from Deutero-Isaiah . At Sunday 2C an optimistic passage from Baruch is chosen. All of these contribute towards the presentation for the first time of John the Baptist in the Gospels. He warns his hearers, “Prepare the way of the Lord”.

In the weekdays there is a sudden shift on the second Thursday, when the Gospel begins to focus intensively on John the Baptist, a focus which will be sustained on the weekdays until the great turning-point of 17th December, when the birth-gospels will take over.

The Third Sunday gives us Proto-Isaiah (yr A), Trito-Isaiah (yr B) and an extremely positive Zephaniah (yr C).

The Fourth Sunday chooses the annunciations of Christ - to dreaming Joseph in Mt (yr A) to Mary in Lk (yr B) and to Elizabeth in Lk (yr C). The first readings are from Proto-Isaiah (A), 2 Samuel (B), and Micah (C). After this the pre-octave contains only one more Isaianic reading.