

Advent I November 29, 2009

Boy, the Christmas Season has really hit. There was a gradual buildup this last month or so, then, in the last week, the thing in all its fullness has truly descended upon us. So, the world around us, and we ourselves, every one, have to get ready for Christmas.

Now, I want to talk about two visions of what preparing for Christmas looks like. The first is our culture's. There is no avoiding this; it just sweeps us away. For the next 25 days our culture, and our own lives, will bombard us with a never-ending parade of what we need *to get* to prepare for Christmas. First of all, of course, we need to get busy. We need to write and mail and decorate and plan and schedule and all sorts of things like that. | | Also, we need to get *stuff*. Stuff out our ears. We need to get stuff for gifts and stuff for parties and stuff for Church and stuff for doing all the things we need to get busy doing. The goal of all of this is to have everything we need to get, got, by their several and various deadlines; and if we do that, we have managed, once more, to prepare for Christmas. Another hard fought victory.

This commercial feeding frenzy is something we all know intimately; something that is simply a part of our lives. And it's not altogether a bad thing, either. After all, there is a real holiness in reaching out to those we love with gifts—this is one way we imitate God. And there are plenty if other wonderful parts of the culture's Christmas season.

But the Church also has something to say about what it looks like to prepare for Christmas, something very different from the culture's vision. This vision doesn't come to us in commercials or on billboards or in bad music we simply can't escape. We have to take ourselves in hand, and lead ourselves firmly down this other path.

What the Church has to say about preparing for Christmas is Advent. Advent is a time of waiting and expectation—a time when we pay some rather serious attention to preparing the inside of ourselves for what God is doing, and is going to do, to us and to our world. It is a time, not of getting, but of letting go.

How do we do that? Well, in here, in Church, we slow down a bit; we focus on penitential themes that encourage introspection and reflection; our music and our readings and our decorations are not about Christmas; they are about moving toward Christmas. The color is purple, as are most of the Advent Candles, all symbols of a solemn and thoughtful time. We are called to look carefully at ourselves, to spend some time (and in spite of the season—it really is possible) some time in prayer and silence. It's a time to be prepared where it really matters for the great gift we receive at Christmas—the coming of God among us. This is important, this is something we need to consider seriously.

In fact, the Church is quite precise about part of this, and has given us some specific things to think about in Advent—surprising and difficult things. Did you notice how our Gospel reading today is hardly about Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus; nor was it a measured reflection on the meaning of the incarnation? Instead, the Gospel, the Good News, is about the end of all things—about Jesus talking about fear and foreboding, death and destruction. Which is as it should be; because this must come first, before anything else.

Traditionally, there are four themes for the four Sundays of Advent—one for each candle. For us to prepare fully for Christmas, the Church tells us, we need to address the realities of: Death, The Last Judgment, Heaven (why the candles is pink) and Hell.

Engage seriously these four last things, the collective wisdom of traditional Christianity tells us, and only then we will be ready for Christmas.

How odd for death to be our topic while the world is counting down shopping days until Christmas. That seems just about as inappropriate as it can get; but it isn't.

You see, death, our own death, and death its own self, is really a special word God says to all the materialism, all the frantic activity, all the focus on stuff, and appearances and suchlike that goes on during this season, (and most of the rest of the time, for that matter). That special word is "No". Death says "No" to the abiding and ultimate value of everything that can possibly go up in smoke. Death reminds us that there will be a time, just a click or two away on the clock of nature, when none of that will matter; when all of that will be gone and forgotten. Now, to be sure, we *know* all of this, but generally in a distant, abstract way. Advent wants us to know that deeply and personally, and with clear eyes.

That's because, in Advent, it's only when we've heard, and heard deeply, the "No" that God says to all of the goodies and treasures and values and glitter of our culture, of our pride, and of our appetites, is only then that we can begin to hear the "Yes" that God offers us.

To hear the "No" of death is to realize that what is of ultimate value and meaning *must* lie, in some basic ways, outside of this world—a world we will leave, and leave just as we entered it. To hear the "No" of death is to realize that God will come into our lives, and simply destroy everything there except the for person we have, by our own choices, become.

All of this can bring us a useful perspective on what is worth our energy, our attention, and our affection—and what isn't. To hear that “No” is to gain mature insight on where our values, our energy, and our hope need to be located.

In the same way, it can be a way to begin to loosen that grip we have on the things and the demands and the priorities of the world and the culture, and to seek another way. And this is where we can find the Good News.

Think about it this: we can only receive a gift if our hands are empty. || If our hands, and our lives, are too full of stuff, or of busyness, or of worries, or of opinions, then there is no way to receive. We can only accept what God is offering if our hands, and our heart, have room for that gift.

This week's theme can help us to remember that what we are really preparing for in Advent is God. What Christmas offers us is God. It offers us God with us, and God for us, and God with and for our world. It offers us the hopes and fears of all the years. But we will only find this if (in addition to the stuff we gotta do) we also take the different road, the road of Advent. After all, too much of the world's preparation for Christmas tends to obscure God, or to replace God, or to substitute for God. Nothing can make that clearer than a bit of reflection on the power and certainty of death.

Perhaps this can remind us once again that, when we let go of some of the competition, our hands and our hearts can have room in them, room perhaps the size of manger, for God, and for God's gifts.