

Late modern folks celebrate Christmas without knowing Advent, hence it is a man-made festivity. This is perhaps the crucial reason why Christmas has been much secularised since the last century. The coming of God's Messiah to the world has lost meaning because Christmas without Advent offers no hope to anyone. The glittering commercialism of Christmas is truly a man-made optimism. The turning on of Christmas lights in major cities of the world is an important piece of news and an event not to be missed. The true symbolic meaning of Christmas, which is darkness awaiting dawn, has been deconstructed. Look at Christmas lights everywhere, so says arrogant commercialism, and you need not have hope in the night. But that is what humankind desperately wants and needs. Advent is the season to remind us we need hope in the night.

In one sense Advent is more important than Christmas. If we take Christmas out of the Bible, we simply lose three chapters of the New Testament. The belief of incarnation, by the way, does not hinge on the nativity story, as the evidence of Paul makes clear. However, if we take Advent out of the Bible, we lose half of the Old Testament and most of the New Testament. The Old Testament People of God believed that, in the midst of the world's confusion, they still lived in God's creation and within God's order. One day the confusion and chaos and disruption would be put away. God's new light would dispel the darkness of the world forever. This day would be the Day of the Lord. The Christian of the New Testament believed that the day of the Lord had already entered into world history through the coming of Jesus. The Day of the Lord has become the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ, as Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 1:8. Therefore, when we speak of Advent we speak not only of Christmas but of the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is our hope in the night.

Today's Gospel reading, which I prefer it to be read from v.21 to the end of the chapter, may have given people a wrong conception that the Day of the Lord is something as bizarre as shepherds and wise men in the nativity story. Clouds, trumpets, angels, cosmic catastrophe – a Christian version of Star Wars is being presented! Just like the nativity story, we tend to think that it's all make-believe. But the nativity story is really about the birth of Jesus, and the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ is about the future hope in Jesus Christ. Let us not forget truth can be expressed in story. That is how the Gospels work.

In today's Epistle passage, Paul elaborates to us how the Advent hope is to do with the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ. After greeting the Corinthians and giving thanks to God on their behalf, Paul moves from what happened to them in the past, through the sort of people they are in the present, to the hope they have for the future, with Jesus at the center at every stage. God gave them his 'grace' in King Jesus (v.4). 'Grace' is one of those little words that contain a whole universe of meaning, summing up the fact that God loved them and acted decisively on their behalf even though they had done nothing whatever to deserve it, but rather the opposite. So grace reminds us that at this time secular celebration of Christmas is not a reality. In other words, by God's favour and his gift of grace we encounter the other reality. The real reality, as the author of Isaiah 64 puts it, 'We are all unclean.' Before we can truly celebrate Christmas let us face the reality of shame. That is why the penitential colour of purple is used in the Advent season. However, grace is not just revealing the shame, it also shows forth the most intimate hope one longs for, the author of Isaiah can then say, 'Yet, Lord, you are our Father.'

The result of this 'grace' was that God's riches had enriched the Corinthian Christians (vs.5-6). They had become a community of learners. Growing eagerly in knowledge about God and His new life, able to teach one another, and so strengthening and confirming the original royal proclamation, 'the messianic message', that had been made to them.

God called them in the past, God equips them in the present, and God will complete the whole process in the future. World history, and the story of the Christian life, has a shape, and Jesus is the shaper at every point. Just as a runner sprinting along the track leans forward to go faster and to get to the finishing line quicker, so the Christian must always be leaning toward God's finishing line, 'eagerly waiting for our Lord, King Jesus to be revealed.' There is coming a day when the hidden truth about the world will be unveiled; this truth will turn out to be a person, and the person will turn out to be Jesus. That is why it's the central Christian badge or sign to 'call Him,' to pray to the Father through Him, to learn to love Him, to know His friendship and love throughout our lives, to have His name always in our hearts and often on our lips.

The Christian hope therefore cannot let Advent be denigrated. Without Advent we celebrate Christmas in triviality. Without Advent we conceal our shame just like wrapping Christmas presents tightly; we don't let it confront us in its starkness. Without Advent we also conceal God's shame of His people becoming unclean. In other words, without Advent we have no clue why Christmas must occur after it. Christmas is not just a story of Jesus but of yours and mine as well. It tells us our shame and God's shame meet together. It reveals to us that, through the birth of Jesus, our intimacy and God's intimacy become one. Jesus taught us to pray, 'Abba Father.' The Advent hope of Isaiah 64 has come true. Our shame has been dealt with by the coming of Jesus. We can face God through Jesus and without shame by calling Him 'Abba, Father.'

I'm not sure whether you're aware that Advent is the beginning of the church year, not so much the end of a calendar year. Advent therefore reminds us we await the unveiling of the God's majesty and love. It is not a make-believe or fantasy because the first Christmas has already appeared.

How do we await the glorious return of Jesus? In readiness, of course. But today's Gospel reading encourages us to treat our hope in watchfulness and vigilance. When Jesus calls us to follow Him, let us not forget He calls us to be watchful and vigilant. To believe in God's future is to see why it is vital to stay alert. Christmas has become so secular and complacent. It is time for us to treat Advent with due respect. Advent calls us to stay awake.