

"Hope, Redemption, and the Three Meanings of Advent"

The word "Advent" (from the Latin "Adventus") can have three related meanings. It can mean "arrival;" it can mean "presence;" it can mean "coming, on the way." For Christians, the liturgical season of Advent means all three.

Let me start with the first meaning, Arrival. I think Bethlehem is what most people have in mind when we speak of welcoming Christ. But let's back up a bit to the start of the story, the Annunciation, and (leading to that) a reflection.

Human history is a vast drama. Vast in space. Vast in time. Vast in peoples. What constitutes the drama? Events: concrete, particular, specific events. There is no history "in general." Particular events make history.

The Annunciation story puts in focus a quite specific event in human history. A young woman, in a remote corner of Palestine, centuries ago. Quite actual: she was troubled. Given what she heard, no surprise. Yet she did not back off. The angel assured her. She accepted the Lord's will as his handmaid.

That event led to the redemption of history.

So the first sentence of today's Gospel catches us at heart: "The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town in Galilee named Nazareth." Lk. 1.26 -38

And so Bethlehem. A baby, a human being. God's own human being. So one of us, his story part of ours. Our story part of his. This shared history God's own history. Trusting God's embrace of our history, we become a people of hope.

Let's skip briefly to the third dimension of Advent: "Coming, What is to come." This dimension points to the ultimate goal that God, in creating the world, has set for us, the goal which is the fundamental hope that drives Christians: the fullness of humankind in the kingdom of God. A kingdom not of this world, rather the fulfillment of our history in the transformation of this world in a new heaven and a new earth. That is what lies at the heart of our hoping, a hope rooted in God's embrace of our history in Jesus.

So now, to where we actually happen to be: Advent as Presence. Christ, who arrived in Bethlehem, inaugurated God's decisive embrace of our history. Now the risen Christ is present to us. He means to share with us the Spirit who sustains our faith and hope and love. So Advent now is not about Christ's arrival. The risen Christ is present to us. Welcoming him means opening our hearts to him and accepting his love, the love that powers our hope and perseverance

As mentioned earlier, Jesus taught that the kingdom he preached is not of this world. The kingdom will be a transformation and fulfillment of this world. But Jesus also said the kingdom of God is among us. So Christians speak of the kingdom of God as both already and not yet.

When speaking about this in class last week a senior asked, "Father Hentz, how can one speak of the kingdom as already among us. Look around, check the newspaper: all the confusion, tension, exhaustion, hostility, wickedness, poverty, everywhere suffering."

Jesus answered that question clearly: where love is operative there is the kingdom. The risen Christ's presence, the power of God's love in the Spirit he shares, means that the kingdom is already here, inchoatively.

So Advent now: welcoming Christ means to open ourselves to Christ, to receive the gift of his Spirit, his love.

We celebrate that love now in our Eucharist.

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