

A Christmas Greeting Revisited

Happy already-but-not-yet!" "Tis the season to be fasting!" "Merry anxiously awaiting!" "Season's expectations of Christ's Second Advent!" It would be pretty odd this Christmas season to greet someone with one of these blessings. They do not sound very warm or cheerful. I doubt that any of these greetings will ever catch on, but maybe they should.

Advent is here again, and amid the excitement and flurry of activity, let us pause and ask ourselves: *What is Advent?* Most people might be tempted to describe Advent by what we do. We go to church, read the Christmas story, sing carols, and light candles to commemorate the events of Jesus' birth. However, none of these activities actually answers the question. They tell of the observance of Advent, and of our traditions, but not what it means.

Historical Advent

Originally, Advent was set aside to celebrate Epiphany—the events in Jesus' life after His birth, such as the visit of the magi, His baptism, and His revelation to the Gentiles. Before that, it was a time to welcome new believers into the Early Church community. It was preceded by a period of 40 days in which converts fasted and cleansed their hearts before God.

Generally, scholars agree that the Christmas festival was not widely celebrated by the church until A.D. 336 or later. The reason for such a late adoption of what has become a cherished event all over the world is best understood in light of eschatological (end times) beliefs within the Early Church. They firmly believed in the soon return of Christ. An annual remembrance of His birth, at a time when His soon return was anticipated, just didn't make sense.

Pope Gregory the Great is attributed with instituting the four-week time of preparation for the "Feast of Christmas" that is still observed today. How appropriate that in the calendars of most churches, the beginning of the church year is found in the celebration of Christ's birth. This is a prophetic act of sacramental living where we testify to what was Christ's birth, what is Christ living in our hearts, and most importantly what is to come through Christ's second advent which He promised.

Advent—the Foretelling of Redemption

The word "advent" (Latin: *adventus*) means "coming." This is from the Greek word *parousia*, which was used in both classical Greek and the koine, or common Greek, spoken by Jesus and His disciples. In Scripture, it is used in many ways. Nowhere is it more poignantly so than when speaking of both Christ's birth in Bethlehem and the promise of Christ's return. Used in this way, *parousia* tells us two things: Jesus is coming, and we should get ready. Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of Christ, purifying our hearts and minds, and waiting in readiness. Originally this "ready waiting" was a way of life for the Jewish people. They looked for the coming of a Messiah who would free the people of Israel from the bonds of slavery to other nations and reestablish them as God's chosen people.

We, however, know that this promised Messiah was Christ, whose birth was foretold by the prophet Isaiah. Because of this, we celebrate Advent as the season in

which we prepare our minds and hearts to remember, much like we prepare for the Lord's Supper. However, instead of remembering His sacrifice, during Advent, we remember His coming. Yet, similar to Communion, it is so much more than just a remembrance. While Communion is symbolic, it is also the act of coming to the table of God and communing with Him. It is not only a celebration of His sacrifice, but an acceptance of an ongoing relationship. In the same way, the Advent season is a time in which we remember the birth of Christ. This commemoration prompts us to turn with renewed interest toward the expectation of His second advent.

The Already-but-Not-Yet

So what does Advent mean for us today? The answer can be found in Jesus' teaching on the gospel found in Mark 1:14-15, which says, "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'" This is the gospel in Jesus' own words. The kingdom of God is near; repent and believe in the good news so that you can come to the Father and receive acceptance into the Kingdom through His Son.

Expressed in these terms, this is the "already-but-not-yet." We live in a paradox. The kingdom of God has been established in our hearts. We are citizens of an eternal realm. In this respect, the good news that all may receive admittance into the Kingdom has already become true in our world. However, the fullness of God's redemptive work through the second coming of Christ has not yet occurred. Jesus' birth, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection already exist in both the historical sense and in the sense that we have received Him and He lives in us. However, we will not fully experience the culmination of God's plan until Jesus returns.

Advent is not just a remembrance of things past. Neither is the good news of the gospel merely a thing of the past. There is no difference between the historical Jesus and the Jesus we believe in today. They are one in the same. We have a burning, anxious, hopeful, expectant readiness in our hearts for the Second Advent. Soon the Jesus of the past and the Jesus of the present will return to bring about the fulfillment of all His promises.

The Promise

It was always about a coming. For the Jews, Isaiah, Zachariah, Mary, the shepherds, Joseph, the wise men, the Gentiles, for us today, and for generations to come; it was always about a coming. It still is. He is coming. Jesus is coming; the Already-but-not-yet. He who came to Bethlehem is coming again. Let us prepare our hearts for the Advent of "The Already," and live in a constant state of readiness for the "not yet." Through prayer and fasting, we anxiously await Christ's return. Because of Advent past, and for the Advent future, we hear ourselves saying, "Come quickly Lord Jesus, come." This is the meaning of Advent.

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