

+ Last week, I characterized the Christian life as a pilgrimage. This is true for each of us, as individual souls, and it is also true of that greater life in which we share, as members of the body of Christ. The earliest descriptor of our religion was “The Way,” or “The Road,” as we find it so called in the Acts of the Apostles. In this collective sense, we share in a corporate pilgrimage that transcends our single lives. It was a journey begun long before us; we believe, confessing the communion of the saints, present, past, and yet-to-come, that the Church in all her fulness, visible and invisible, militant and expectant, shares this life of spiritual travel. Christ, our captain, like Joshua leading the people of Israel over Jordan, heads the column, and, as Reginald Heber's hymn has it, “his blood-red banner” of the cross streams before us, “a noble army, men and boys, the matron and the maid.” To this procession, in our mind's eye, we might add that unseen host of angelic ministers, “all the company of heaven,” as our liturgy puts it, superintending the movement of the whole.

Now this is, to be sure, a fantastical image. It sounds like something out of Tolkien's Middle-Earth, something completely foreign to our own lived experience. Our own, more modern modes of travel are more likely to inform our mental images. Rather than moving slowly, in a wide and various company, isn't it true that our experience of life's journey has become more and more like automobile travel? We travel now through life, at high speeds, in the company of a few well-known companions, perhaps, isolated from the elements and any fellow travelers. Instead of the collective momentum of the ancient procession, pulling us along its wake, we find ourselves free and individual drivers, choosing our own roads—and how many different roads there seem to be. We recently celebrated the American feast of Thanksgiving, that strange secular-and-sacred hybrid of a holiday; the origins of that custom, tied up as they are in the mythology of America's founding, are connected, of course, with a group of religious exiles from Europe known simply as “the Pilgrims.” At one time, these people, with their corporate journey to the New World, in the hope of establishing a more just and godly nation, were particularly symbolic of our national aspirations and self-conception. Now, it must be admitted, that corporate sense of journey has departed; the aim of secular culture today is not that we should arrive together at some destination, but rather, like an ambitious city planner or civil engineer, the political and spiritual philosophy of the present day seems dedicated merely to traffic control, ensuring that, in the chaotic and contradictory movements of the atomized individual through life, he or she might arrive at some chosen location without causing collisions or pile-ups.

Even if, as Christians ought, we keep the older image in mind, and believe ourselves to belong in the great and holy procession, it is difficult to avoid entertaining some disturbing modifications to that picture. We feel ourselves to be far from the head of the column; so much of human history has interposed between us and the events recorded in the gospels, that it can seem, at times, that Christ, his cross, and the “noble army of martyrs” and apostles whom we celebrate in our liturgical calendar are dim figures on the horizon, far ahead in the vanguard, and the subject of grumbling speculation among the impatient crowd further behind. Indeed, many of us have witnessed desertions, large and small. Not to mention individual apostasy, whole organizations of people who call themselves by the name of “Church,” have sundered themselves from the main body, and travel at various distances and vectors in relationship to the faithful. The whole picture of this pessimistic scene might best have been captured by the poet, Matthew Arnold, in *Dover Beach*: “And we are here, as on a darkling plain, swept with confused alarms of struggle and fight, where ignorant armies clash by night.”

We must be careful, however, not to treat the image of the pilgrimage of faith as more than a symbol. It is helpful, in that it implies purpose, a certain progression, and a certain state of mind to go with it. The image of the pilgrimage moves us to watchfulness, perseverance, and trust in Him whom we are to follow. But it ceases to be helpful when, comparing the life of faith to an earthly journey, and relying too heavily on the physical metaphor of movement from place to place and over concrete periods of time, we lose sight of or misconstrue the true nature of our spiritual pilgrimage. For the journey of the Church is not to be measured in miles or in centuries—it is a journey, not to a place, but it is a journey of

*becoming*. It is not a passage from this world to another, but, like our Lord's own earthly pilgrimage, it is an incarnation. When we speak of the Last Judgment, and the end of all things, the Christian Church properly means the beginning of a New Creation, which is the fulfillment of the Old, as the law of love mentioned by St. Paul in today's epistle is the completion and perfection of Sinai's law.

We see this work of transformation and purification modeled also in this morning's gospel, albeit in a negative fashion. Christ goes up to Jerusalem, enters in to the precincts of the temple, there to drive out those who have perverted the house of God, who have turned it, as He says, from a house of prayer into a den of thieves. His work of judgment here is a removal of that which does not belong—but it is also a restoration, that what does belong, i.e., prayer and worship, may flourish. What does all this have to do with Advent? The season of Advent is so named from the Latin *adventus*, itself the translation of a Greek word, *parousia*. *Parousia* is a difficult word to render in English, meaning something like “appearance,” or “arrival;” most accurately, if clumsily, it means something like “being/presence-along-side-of.” When the Early Christians, like St. Paul, used this word, they were referring to the return of Jesus Christ in glory, at whose appearance the New Creation would be finally and perfectly inaugurated. Over the years, Christian theologians have spoken of three distinct “Advents.” The first was, of course, the *parousia* of the Word-made-flesh in the manger at Bethlehem, begotten by the Holy Spirit of St. Mary the Virgin. It is this strange, stupefying, and world-upending fact of history that we will commemorate at Christmastide, and the season of Advent is, in some measure, also a commemoration of that period of waiting, begun with the promise made to Abraham, and continuing through the lives of righteous prophets and kings who lived under the Old Covenant, in expectation of Messiah.

However, as we will note particularly at next week's Eucharist, the season of Advent is also a devotion to the second *parousia*, or the Second Coming of Christ. Now, especially because of the unfortunate excesses to which some of our brethren in certain other Christian traditions have gone in their, let us say, unhealthy fixation with things end-timesy, we Anglicans are disposed to be a little dismissive of this Advent. We're a bit worried that, if we even start talking about it, sooner or later somebody's going to pull out a chart detailing dispensations, the precise order of events surrounding the end of the present age, complete with the identity of beasts and the man of sin, all painstakingly updated since last month's apocalypse failed, yet again, to materialize. If not slightly amusing, it will be awkward. There's no denying that “End-times” Christians have not been great PR for the Christian faith.

The truth is that we can fall into either error—neglecting or over-emphasizing the First and the Second Advent, and in all cases failing to take account of the Third. The “progressive” Christian of today looks back, principally, to the First Advent. He or she appreciates the beauty and symbolism of the incarnation, but sees the person of Jesus Christ as, fundamentally, a figure of the past—a powerful story, but one whose significance lies mainly in the realm of memory, though, if this sort of believer is to retain the name of Christian, a memory that informs the future in some vague and undefined manner. Many so-called “conservative” Christians, as we've already mentioned, fixate themselves on the Second Advent. For them, the past is but a signpost to future, yet more spectacular revelations of Divine power. What matters is being on the right side of things when (and surely it must be soon) the end-times are ushered in with all the glory and subtlety of a Hollywood blockbuster. But there is that third *parousia*, and it is for this Third Advent that the others exist. For Christ came first to gather and establish His people, and He will come only when the number of those with whom and in whom He came to dwell is filled up. The Third Advent, then, is the abiding presence of Jesus Christ in His Church, in the hearts of the faithful, Himself the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He has come, is coming at the present hour, and will come again, but all that He may establish and erect the dwelling place of God Himself in and through His people, a new Temple and house of worship, fashioned, because having fed on it, we have been joined member-to-member in it, out of His own Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity.

Advent, then, is that season of the year, appropriately its true beginning, at which we study to make ourselves ready for His daily, continual, and transformative appearing. It is when we have made

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St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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ourselves truly open to this repetitive, sometimes painful, but life-giving presence, that we will truly join the great and catholic procession, and truly walk the pilgrimage of faith. We will not grumble about where we're going, or how long it takes to get there; rather, we will pray: Come, Lord Jesus; what would you have me *become*; how would you dwell in me, and I in you? It is high time for all of us, if we have lost sight of the Third Advent, to awake again out of sleep. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Let us walk honestly, as in the day, acclaiming with gladness, *Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is He that cometh even now in the Name of the Lord.* + Amen.