

Advent 1

Romans 13: 8ff

Matthew 21:1ff

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, + and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Somewhere in the Third century the Church began the practice of a time of repentance and reflection prior to Christmas/Epiphany. It started on November 11th, the Feast of St. Martin of Tours and thus became known as St. Martin's Lent. It was set in preparation for baptism on Epiphany and became known as Adventus—the Coming; it got people ready for an encounter with Jesus that would change their lives permanently.

Around that same period the scripture texts for this first Sunday were set. One might expect to hear the lessons that are appointed for Morning Prayer today, such as Isaiah or the story of Elisabeth and Zechariah, or other of the early episodes from our family story. We could even imagine getting some of the genealogy from Matthew, who with the names for the coming child gives us wonderful hints about what he will bring and be; Jesus—'God saves', Christ—the Messiah or new King, or Emmanuel—"God with Us" to help set the stage for our preparation. All of those seem to fit the mood of the season, because it is a season of longing, waiting, looking for someone we cannot do without. So, has it ever struck you a bit strange or unusual that we have read another narrative; the triumphal entry to Jerusalem which fits a different day...you know it as Palm Sunday? Here on the very first day of the Christian year we have a little piece of Lent and Holy Week. What is afoot from the Church's wisdom in this offering? Just perhaps we are getting a 'foretaste'; a sampling of what we will get fully at the Nativity; not only a baby, God in human wrappings, but one who comes with lowly passion and a fierce determination not to leave us carrying our sins or to dwell in darkness.

We need, and I would suggest desperately so, is to recognize that Advent promises God will deliver us, and by a means not normally recognizable or expected. Advent is not about God providing us with reruns of what we have already seen or know, but with Good News we could only anticipate by considering the improbable! We are entering into a dream-season where the hope of the ages will come into pinpoint clarity—God is about reversing the damage of sin and death and fear which hangs over His creation!! And thus today, before we go jumping into Christmas carols and tinsel and 'peace on earth', let us pause and consider just what we will be getting when the Nativity does arrive.

I know full well that we are a culture and time attuned and infatuated with facts and data and recording every facet of events imaginable. I dread to think of the trees that will give up their lives to produce the paper needed to record current political proceedings! But facts are not equivalent to truth, and the power of events is not to be found in whether they have painful or joyful moments, but in what they come to mean to us. When we banter with friends or family about the happenings of the day we may present them like a list out of a catalogue, but when a transaction has gone into the depths of our being, the quality of the sharing is of a totally different nature. Telling you that a physician's appointment is on the schedule is quite contrasted with sharing a serious diagnosis isn't it? I want to ask that you read the Gospel text for a few moments not as historical chronicling by some scribe, but as a whisper from a friend and to listen to its heart and soul and allow it to enter yours.

What is striking about Matthew's account, which quotes Zechariah the prophet's call to Jerusalem to rejoice for a king who is righteous, will save, and restore the balance of the world is coming, is the mimicking and contrast to the power brokers of the ancient (and we might add modern) world. Listen to Quintus Rufus' description of Alexander the Great's entry into the city of Babyon following his defeat of that empire:

“Moving on to [Babylon](#), Alexander was met by [Mazaeus](#), who had taken refuge in the city after the battle. He came as a suppliant with his grown-up children to surrender himself and the city. Alexander was pleased at his coming, for besieging so well-fortified a city would have been an arduous task

and, besides, since he was an eminent man and a good soldier who had also won distinction in the recent battle, Mazaeus' example was likely to induce the others to surrender. Accordingly Alexander gave him and his children a courteous welcome.

Nevertheless, he put himself at the head of his column, which he formed into a square, and ordered his men to advance into the city as if they were going into battle.

A large number of the Babylonians had taken up a position on the walls, eager to have a view of their new king, but most went out to meet him,

including the man in charge of the citadel and royal treasury, Bagophanes. Not to be outdone by Mazaeus in paying his respects to Alexander, Bagophanes had carpeted the whole road with flowers and garlands and set up at intervals on both sides silver altars heaped not just with frankincense but with all manner of perfumes.

Following him were his gifts - herds of cattle and horses, and lions, too, and leopards, carried along in cages.

Next came the [Magians](#) chanting a song in their native fashion, and behind them were the Chaldaeans,^{note} then the Babylonians, represented not only by priests but also by musicians equipped with their national instrument. (The role of the latter was to sing the praises of the Persian kings, that of the Chaldaeans to reveal astronomical movements and regular seasonal changes.)

At the rear came the Babylonian cavalry, their equipment and that of the horses suggesting extravagance rather than majesty.

Surrounded by an armed guard, the king instructed the townspeople to follow at the rear of his infantry; then he entered the city on a chariot and went into the palace. The next day he made an inspection of Darius' furniture and all his treasure...”

SERMON – FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT – 1 DECEMBER 2019

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

Father Mark Menees, D.D.

Now that's what you can call "making an entrance"! Consider the spectacle we provide for state leaders who visit a capital, or athletic teams upon winning a title. It is obvious that pomp and show still play a role in the way we see power and the importance of people and events.

Contrast that with today when we have a king whose entrance has none of the glitz or glory, but would have been understood very well as making a statement about a new kingdom, and a reversal of the way power would be used, and even his willingness to face suffering in order to deliver God's peace on earth. He enters our world today in much the same manner and with the same desire; to deliver us from falsehood, sin, brokenness, and the power of the shadows of this life. Jesus did not hit Jerusalem as a celebrity, but lowly on a donkey, i.e. hidden from and not fully noticed by the ways of the glory of Macedonia, Rome or contemporary world powers. If you look for him in those images or ways of showing face, you likely will not see him. As Luther observed, any God who is not hidden from the ways of this world is no God at all. His glory is found between the seams of abundance and power and might of what gets noticed in our culture. He comes instead stealthily and continuously in absolution, in bread and wine, in water and oil, in the Sacrament of marriage and Holy Orders, in the unrelenting patience and love of a parent for a broken child, and in God's people, who against all appearances to the contrary trust that God's future is bound up in this ragged King who simply will not go away or stop until the world is healed.

I know full well, as do you, that we continue to struggle with sin and harm. Our lives often do not look like the glory of God or the coming of the Messiah. We suffer illness and tragedy; we fail to reflect the love of God to one another; we are often disappointed in others and ourselves. And death is still a part of our journey. To the casual observer things do not look particularly redeemed. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem did not match the finesse of Alexander the Great or myriad others who have come and gone across the pages of history. But his life, death, and resurrection have transformed the lives of countless people who in him have found a King worth following and trusting. Behold, your King is coming. Lowly, but bearing gifts that no other can give—peace, hope, salvation, wholeness, wrapped in the simplest of means—bread, wine, water, and Word. Keep your eyes and hearts open. Amen+