

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, or next Sunday with Isaiah 55 (an astounding text) or the story of Elisabeth and Zechariah (the parent of John), 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.

These yearnings are part of the spirituality of Advent. I often experience and think of this as a time of Holy Longing or maybe Holy Frustration! We yearn for new beginnings and hope even as we live with unmet dreams and unchanged habits. We seek after what is hinted at, but not yet. So, does it strike you a bit strange or unusual that we have read another narrative; the triumphal entry to Jerusalem which fits a very 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? Let me suggest that perhaps we are getting a ‘foretaste’; an unexpected sampling of what we will be given 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 dwelling in darkness. The cleansing of the Temple is a mirror image of the call of Advent—the cleansing of our souls as God’s temple as well.

We often think of judgment juridically, as someone sitting above us with a gavel ready to hand down a sentence. But perhaps in Advent it is what I call ‘reflexive judgment’. That is, the kind of assessment that happens when we see the beauty or truth in another person, and we come to realize we have missed that and need cleansing to make room for beauty or truth or compassion. Cleansing of the clutter in our souls is the beginning of being open to seeing our real needs. This Gospel is a foretaste of who is to come.

We need, and I would suggest desperately so, to recognize that Advent promises God will deliver us from sin, phony hope, false idols, 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! W. H. Auden said it well when he wrote, “Nothing that is possible can save us; only 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, (I did a b, & c or same old same old), but when an event goes 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 distinct from sharing a serious diagnosis with a loved one, 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 of truth 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 because 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. Orosius, the historian, describes the pomp of Roman military victors as they entered the great city. Here is a description by Mark Cartwright of Ancient History Encycl.

After breakfast, the victor put on special purple-coloured robes and offered sacrifices to the gods. He was ready for his big moment. The procession entered the city at a specific point, the *Porta Triumphalis*, a gate used only for that purpose, and then went through the streets and squares of Rome along a route chosen by the commander. The consuls and politicians would lead, followed by a number of impressive-looking captives from the battlefield – best of all would be a captured royal, perhaps theatrically enchained. Certain episodes of the **battle** might be represented in the procession via paintings or even enactments involving real captives. If the occasion was marking a naval triumph there might be a nautical theme going on with ships’ beaks and captured equipment. There were musicians, torch-bearers, and flag wavers to add to the pageantry, as well as examples of the exotic flowers and animals from the conquered region. Next came the **war**-booty with the more **gold** and **silver** on display the better. After that came the lictors (magisterial attendants) who carried the *fasces* decked with laurel leaves and then the commander himself.

Star of the show, the god-like victor would ride a spectacular tall-sided chariot pulled by four horses. He wore a laurel crown and carried a laurel branch in his right hand. In his left hand, he carried an ivory sceptre with an eagle at the top, symbolic of the triumph. He was accompanied by a slave whose job was to hold above his head a gold crown and continuously whisper in his ear that, amongst all this adoration, he should remember that he was only a mortal and not actually a god. For this reason, he would repeat *respice* or ‘look behind’. After the chariot came the commander’s children and officers on horseback. Finally came the troops, who usually sang songs to ward off the jealousy of the gods, and, if there had been any, a crowd of grateful civilians who had won their freedom by the defeat of their enemy in the battle. (1.)

Now that’s what you can call “making an entrance”; a grand display of temporal power!! 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. This is not Pax Romana, Pax Deo. 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, -no chariot, not treasury, no lions, and tigers, and bears (oh my), no trumpets blaring--i.e. hidden from and not fully noticed by the ways of the glory of 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. He will not be found in what is already possible; only in what is improbable. His glory is found between the seams of abundance and power and might of what gets noticed in our culture. But make no mistake, He comes instead stealthily and continuously in absolution, in bread and wine, in water and oil, in the Sacraments 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 Vespasian or Julius Caesar 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. Advent call out, "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. Advent takes us somewhere we haven't been before. It takes us to someone we are yearning to meet. Amen+