

Advent

The Church keeps us properly focused with its own special liturgical year and calendar. It lays before us the history of the unchanging mysteries of our salvation. It takes us from the creation in Genesis to the wedding banquet of the Lamb in Paradise. Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, is central to this story of God's unfailing love. Each week becomes a school to learn to surrender to God in love and service to others.

The Church's New Year's Day is the first Sunday of Advent. The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus*, which means "coming" or "arrival." Advent opens the Christmas season by reminding us of the birth of Jesus, who was born in a cave of impoverished parents.

Advent is a joyous season tinged with penance. Joy comes from the thought of receiving Jesus, the light of the world. Penance is a preparation to receive this great gift. While Advent's focus is primarily on Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, it affords us the opportunity to consider other ways Jesus comes to us. As our Redeemer he comes to us with his saving grace and the unmerited gift of faith. As the Word who is God he comes to us in the Word of God, the Scriptures. He uniquely comes to us in the staggering reality of the Eucharist. Finally, Advent reminds us that Jesus is our Lord, the Alpha and Omega, who will come to judge the living and the dead in the Second Coming.

As we anticipate the feast of the Nativity, the custom of the Advent Wreath aids our focus. It is a wonderful way to involve children in Christmas preparation. The gradual lighting of the four candles, one each Sunday of the Advent season, using the liturgical color of purple and rose for Gaudete Sunday symbolizes our expectation of Our Savior's first coming into the world. On Christmas Day a fifth white candle representing Christ is lit or the four candles are replaced with white ones. The lighting of the white candle(s) proclaims Christ has come!

The journey and arrival of the three kings who followed the mysterious star to Bethlehem has long captured the imagination of Christians. Traditionally their names were Gaspar, Balthasar and Melchior. It is believed they ruled the land that is now Iraq and Iran. The Magi give us an important lesson in detachment from and the proper use of material things. I suspect that there are few people who use riches well and offer them to God with the generosity and love of these holy kings.

Jesus gave this important lesson: "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Lk 16:13). Mammon is an Aramaic word that means "wealth." The reaction of those who considered themselves to be the saints of Israel was insightful: "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they *scoffed* at him" (Lk 16:14).

The Greek word that is translated as scoffed, *ekmykterizein*, literally means: "turn up the nose." It conveys the meaning of "scoffed," "sneered," "ridiculed," "mocked" and "scorned." It recalls Jeremiah who wrote of Jesus in prophecy: "I have become a laughing stock all the day; every

one *mocks* me” (Jer 20:7). St. Luke used that same Greek word when he described a scene at Calvary. After Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34)... “the rulers *scoffed* at him” (Lk 23:35).

Attachment to wealth and material things makes a mockery of our love for Jesus. Indeed, they may replace him altogether except, perhaps, as a cultural veneer. Years ago I put together the budget for our parish in California. I was surprised at the low level of weekly giving, which for the average family was less than a six-pack of beer! The God who alone reads hearts has the last word. Psalm 2 depicts men taking counsel against the Lord and his anointed. However, the God of heaven laughs for “the Lord has them in *derision*” (Ps 2:4).

God, of course, has no need for our money. However, he wants us to sacrifice for the support of our Church, to assist the poor, and to maintain worthwhile charities so our hearts will cling to him. In the Old Testament to tithe was 10%. As my spiritual director explained to me, Jesus has upped the ante. He asks for 100% of our hearts. Advent, then, is a reminder to make the ceaseless offer God desires: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The *gold* he desires is love. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6:5; Mt 22:37; Mk 12:30; Lk 10:27). “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34-35).

Frankincense represents continual prayer, which is the true incense that rises to the heavenly throne (Rev 5:8; 8:3-4) as a pleasing aroma. The *Catechism* instructs us that “prayer is the life of the new heart. It ought to animate us at every moment... But we cannot pray ‘at all times’ if we do not pray at specific times, consciously willing it” (# 2697).

Myrrh represents the patient acceptance of the labor and trials of daily life, and true mortifications, which we offer to Jesus with ardent affection. “Work honors the Creator’s gifts and the talents received from him. The difficulties of life can also be redemptive. By enduring the hardship of work in union with Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth and the one crucified on Calvary, man collaborates in a certain fashion with the Son of God in his redemptive work” (# 2427). In regard to his suffering St. Paul wrote: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24).

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