

The Trip Will End Advent I

I've often pondered that strange sense of sweet sadness associated with the Advent season. I'm reminded that Advent is indeed a time of fasting and inward reflection as we prepare ourselves for the coming of our Lord, both in His first advent, as the infant of Bethlehem, and at His expected second advent, at the end of time.

For the world, there will be a brief burst of glory on Christmas Day, the culmination of weeks of anticipation. But the explosion of light will fade afterward just as fast as it occurred, and the ensuing days offer nothing but anticlimax. No sooner is the goal of Christmas reached, than the realization occurs that the event hadn't measured up to the expectations.

But for the believer, it shouldn't be so. The journey is as significant as the goal. And, in fact, unless the journey is made, following the same pathway our Lord and all of the faithful were obliged to walk, the goal will not be forthcoming. This is where that poignant sense of tristesse arises from. It is the experience of moving onward, always onward, to a destination outside of space and time.

A solitary prophet, together with his family and directed by God, left a familiar home to commit himself to the unknown, in order to become the father of many nations. A chosen people called by God endured the wilderness of their own disobedience to take possession of land that had been promised to them from eternity past. A divine plan is unfolding, and it will take into account the worst of human error, and the finest and most saintly of virtues. The terrible hammer of judgment will once again fall, the covenant race will be driven from their beloved possession, and the nation will fall under the hand of perpetual, iron-handed foreign rule. But the plan goes on, unstopped. It's ever persistent footsteps proceed through the fantastic territory of events prophesied long before.

And finally, an indigent, sorely distressed young couple make their lonely way through the Judean countryside, in response to mandates handed down from levels of government far too high above them to be perceived. They possess nothing other than visions, divine visions, which they hardly dare breathe to anyone else, so sacred and unexpected and unprecedented are they. They sense they have somehow been moved into the very center of a great raging conflict which

seems to have engaged all the powers of both heaven and earth. They pray. She is in advanced labor. She groans. In vain they search the horizon for the faint lights of the tiny village which is their destination.

Soon, in terribly uncomfortable circumstances, she cries out in the throes of labor, while her perspiring husband, with that helplessness of a man confronted with a task outside his experience, stands by to assist. The Baby arrives, crying, into the world, and though the heavens briefly rejoice, and the wonder seems for a short season to surpass the travail, the urgency of the mission impels the little family onward. They will have little rest. They have not arrived.

The Child grows, and when He reaches full manhood, His own feet must commence the relentless journey. *A man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity* (Is. 53:3b). Hardly a village and town of Palestine is deprived of a visit of this One filled with *grace and truth* (Jn 1:17). But all the forces of human and demonic will gather together in collusion against Him. His progress, and the movement of the entire divine plan with which all the foregoing had participated, appeared to be halted, stopped, permanently stalled at the foot of a bloody cross. The silence of night that gathered around the tomb in which His body lay was oblivious to the wicked, triumphant laughter that filled another realm.

But the light of day brought the greatest miracle of all time. And though joy dared to rise again amid the mundane circumstances of a world that moves onward with no concerns outside its own, the plan of God continues. It remains unresolved. It still seeks consummation.

The Gospel is preached by His disciples, who suffer the fire of persecution for its sake. The church develops in form and practice, and undergoes seasons of expansion and retrenchment. It passes through the awful waste places of lukewarmness and apostasy. And the believing remnant in *the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen* (Heb. 11:1), continue to wait.

All of those throughout salvation history, who in confidence have held fast to God's promises, have had the courage not only to believe that their expectations will be rewarded, but also to wholeheartedly and joyfully embrace the process of getting there. This is where the glory resides. It accrues especially from the darkest and most difficult moments of our lives that are lived out in faith. Because this is so, the gift of arriving at the end of the long trip is hardly supe-

rior to living fully within each moment required in getting there. To reject the present in favor of the future will be to cheat the future of all that it might have possessed. This requires some considerable rethinking on our part. We vastly underestimate the eternal value that God wishes to attach to each segment of this process we call life.

I think I can see where that wistful, even painful sense of heaviness associated with this most special of Church seasons arises from. I see that I am called to join a band of others who assumed that the nature of life is to keep moving onward. Their expectations of fulfillment in this sphere are very low. They do not assume they will be well treated here, because they know that the world views their journey enviously, from afar, convicted by their disinterest in its offerings, and angered that their gaze is steadfastly set somewhere else, on a place they cannot see.

They are sad, yet very deep in their hearts they are cherishing and protecting a happiness which will some day be brought forth in its entirety, within its true context.

And in that time, and at that place, the trip will finally end.

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