

Delayed Gratification

1 And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples, 2 Saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me. 3 And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them. 4 All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, 5 Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass. 6 And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them, 7 And brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon. 8 And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way. 9 And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest. 10 And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, Who is this? 11 And the multitude said, This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee. 12 And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, 13 And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.

If you were to page through the next three Gospel selections for the following Sundays in Advent, you would quickly see that they highlight the tremendous enigma that is represented by the kingdom ascribed to our Lord Jesus Christ. Next Sunday features the events surrounding His return. It is a time of great upheaval, of *distress of nations*, of *men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth* (from St. Luke xxi.). The Sunday after offers a completely different scene: John the Baptist is languishing in prison, having been arrested by King Herod. We can assume that John had hoped for immediate results from Jesus in the form of establishing a messianic rule which would have been the fulfillment of John's own preaching: *Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, and said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?* (from St. Matthew xi. 2. ff.). And in the final Sunday of Advent, we have yet another incident. The Jewish leaders cross-examined John. *Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. . . I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord. . . there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; he it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose latchet I am not worthy to unloose. . .* (from St. John 1. 19. ff.). "Where is this King? What does he look like? Exactly who is he?"

In today's passage, Jesus still refuses to perform the predictable and to immediately take the throne that was rightfully His, even after having received such a welcome celebration from the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Instead of assuming the sort of kingly bearing that would obligate respect and place fear in the heart of His enemies, He comes to *the daughter of Sion. . . meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass*, almost a mockery of grandeur.

There is great mystery, and uncertainty, and irresolution about all of this. The principal players in our Lord's story, even those very closest to Him, could not adequately understand His purposes and intentions, nor the timetable associated with the realization of the prophecies they knew pointed straight to Him. It's as if God had imposed upon all the world the necessity of patiently waiting in faith for the completion of a great puzzle that yet remained absolutely unsolvable.

The point I wish to make is that we are still very much caught up in the agony of unanswered questions pertaining to the completion of our Lord's purposes. Granted, we possess through the hindsight afforded us by the New Testament scriptures that there are indeed two advents, and the nature and character of each are very different. But there remain a host of things we long to understand, and don't: Why does the Lord's return tarry so long? What is accomplished by the wait? History, since He arrived the first time, has resulted in so much disaster, culminating in the awful events of this past century. With all of the evil that has occurred, is underway now, and surely may yet happen, what good can possibly be distilled from allowing things to continue?

The consequence of these urgent and unanswered questions should push us into the spirit of this Season. It is "penitential". Were there no rigor involved in the particulars of our faith, were all questions answered, were all ways smooth, predictable, and easy, there would be no cause for striving toward God. It is precisely in those elements of our walk with the Lord which remain incomprehensible and beyond reach that I am obliged to exercise myself, to leave my comfort zone, to realize my limits, and to be dependent upon God. Anyone who truly meets Jesus can be expected to be stretched to the limit. There is no other form of discipleship.

This is a very private matter, experienced well within the confines of the Church. The world knows nothing of it. Christmas is approaching. The goods will be delivered. Appetites will be satisfied. Cravings, even if temporarily, will be assuaged. It will come on with a rush, and leave at an even faster speed. There will be a faint sense of joy, buoyed up by the season's ambience provided liberally at every turn. But as with the crowds who greeted Jesus in Jerusalem, it will remain in the level of sentiment, something to be as easily discarded as it was assumed.

Meanwhile, Jesus must walk onward, His way ever lonelier, for the consummation of His great work is yet far, far off. Few are the company that remain with Him, and even fewer they appear to be as the journey stretches to seemingly impossible lengths of time, with the goal apparently no nearer. He remains inscrutable. Although we, the Church, *are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones* (Eph. 5:30), He divulges to us no more than we need know. We must endure the wait by faith. But life goes on with its very human concerns, and circumstances press us for answers to our biggest questions. And a mocking, unbelieving world itself seizes us

by the shirt and sneers, “Aha! You people who claim to know God don’t know any more than we do! Where is your so-called salvation? We no longer believe in this God you proclaim! We don’t find a shred of relevance to our lives from such things.” All of this presses us to our knees. We grieve as we realize that many of their accusations have a just ring, and we feel powerless to reply, and shorn of arguments. We look for vindication, but no longer find it anywhere in the culture. Who will stand up and speak on God’s behalf? Even the church itself seems to stumble about, trying to find its footing, without a central spokesperson, caught as it were off guard. If the Apostle Paul could declare in his day ..*knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is a hand...* what does this imply about 2015?

In view of these things, our attitude during Advent is one of penitential self-examination. Our hope is deferred. It certainly won’t be realized even through the best of Christmas experiences. No, having watched our Lord’s eyes, seated as he was over the welcoming crowds, strangely fixed upon some intangible destination way above and beyond them, we must accept the verdict of delayed gratification to the fulfillment of all the very best and highest hopes of life. Here, “in the time of this mortal life”, there will be joys, but many sorrows with them. We look for “the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty”, when even the most meagre of our hopes will be vastly realized.

If we walk as those who expect no more of things here than it is reasonable to expect, we will be providing a perspective to others which may some day mean their salvation. We enjoy the world, but our destiny is not bound up with it. We appreciate all of the delights of human life, but we do not idolize them. There is a holy restlessness that never allows us to be chained to the temporal, and in that sense we are absolutely free. *All things are lawful unto me*, said St. Paul, *but all things are not expedient : all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any* (1 Cor. 6:12).

Let us, then, be in an attitude of preparation. We are making ourselves ready to receive a great and holy King. We will meet Him first as a Babe under primitive circumstances in a remote Israeli village, homeless and helpless, a tiny speck of life amid the grand schemes of a world-dominating empire. He will grow into a Man who will die for the sins of the whole world. And again, after an indeterminate period of time, if we are patient, if we are faithful, we will meet Him as He returns to consummate His work in an eternal reign.

Doesn’t this call for effort? Would an entire lifetime of getting ready be sufficient toward such an end?

To quote the beginning of today’s Collect: “Almighty God, give us grace...!”
In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.