

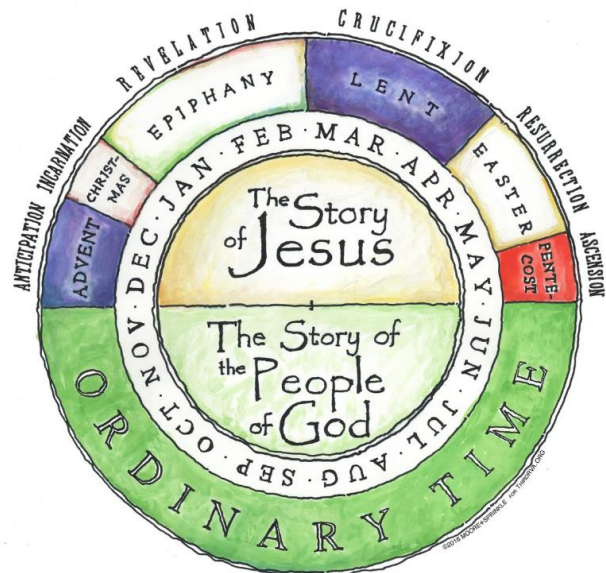
# Advent

*Advent, 27<sup>th</sup> November 2022*

Happy New Year! Well, it is... at least for the church. Today is Advent Sunday, the start of the church year, the beginning of the liturgical calendar. Claire put up a version of a liturgical year a while back – this is a different one.

This wheel shows how we cover all the main biblical events in roughly half a year, from Advent to Pentecost. The timing is mainly dictated by the timing of the festivals, Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, and leaves a very long time for nothing particular in the calendar over the summer. (At this church we do add in Creation Time at the end of Ordinary Time.) I like the way this wheel labels the top half as The Story of Jesus, and the other half as The Story of the People of God.

We start the year with the coming of Jesus – Advent. As it says on the wheel, it is a time of anticipation, looking forward to Christmas. It is also looking forwards to the future coming of Christ.



I actually preached on Advent Sunday last year too. The reading was Luke 21, which is Luke's version of Jesus teaching about the End Times, apocalyptic visions of the future. The slide shows one of the pictures I used last year. Today's reading is just the start of that teaching, with Jesus urging us to be watchful and prepared. I am not going to repeat what I said last year, but go off in a slightly different direction, contrasting the two sides of Advent: Jesus coming as a baby, and Jesus as King.

There is an amazing book call War Doctor by a surgeon called David Nott. He volunteered in war zones all over the world, patching up people who were injured in fighting. This meant working in difficult conditions with people suffering terrible wounds, working long hours and being confronted by endless need. He tells the story of returning from a tour abroad and going immediately to a dinner with the queen, where he sat next to the queen. He was completely shattered, emotionally drained, and pretty much unable to sustain a conversation. The queen realised this, and gently took over the conversation, talking about corgis and life generally, and allowing him the space to be. It is a really touching story about how sensitive the late queen could be, and Nott really appreciated what she did. There is a contrast in this story similar to the contrast I want to look at today. Between the status of the monarch, the ruler of the country who could expect respect and formality and engagement from people, but who had the humility to put that aside for someone who was clearly in distress.

In our homegroup, we have been looking at another book, Dear England by Stephen Cottrell, now Archbishop of York, and previously Bishop of Reading. He was buying a coffee at Paddington Station, dressed in a dog collar, when a young girl asked him "What made you become a priest?". He gave her a quick answer, because he was in a hurry to catch a train, but he was not very satisfied with it. So, he wrote this book to give a full answer. I wonder if the girl has read it?

Cottrell tries to avoid appealing either to his own experience (which is not accessible to anyone else and therefore not very helpful) or to the Bible (which other people may not accept as a knock down argument). So, he starts by pointing us to God through our experiences of wonder, caring, tenderness, sadness, love. Then he comes to Jesus, as God's means of telling us about himself. Cottrell tells of how the early Christians described him, and the effect this had on them.

And it is extraordinary. In Colossians, Paul writes "He is the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1v15). Think what he is saying.

Paul had not known Jesus, but he knew many people who had. His conversion on the road to Damascus was just some 5 years or so after the crucifixion, and he joined the church then. The letter to the Colossians is written some 30 years or so after Jesus' life; it is one of the first writings we have about Jesus - even the earliest gospel came a few years later. Yet Paul is saying here that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. "All things have been created through him and for him." In Colossian 2v9 Paul writes "in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily".

The disciples who had been with Jesus in his ministry said similar things: in John's gospel and letters, in Peter's letters, and various speeches quoted in Acts.

Jews did not lightly call someone God. They would not even pronounce the name of God, so much were they in awe of it. Yet the disciples came to believe that Jesus was not only the Christ, the Chosen One, but also that he was God.

Can you imagine coming to the conclusion that someone you know is God? The creator of everything? Who sustains and is in control of the vastness of the universe? Or if not one of your friends, how about someone special you have heard or know or admire. Everyone has their weaknesses, don't they? Yet, while Jesus was on earth, the disciples say to him "My Lord and my God!" (John 20v28).

I often feel that Advent hymns seem a bit remote and strange: *Lo, he comes with clouds descending* (which we are singing later). They are trying to grapple with the incredible cosmic significance of Christ. This man who is God is coming again in clouds of glory. That in some way this man who is God will bring history to an end.

In comparison, Christmas is a relatively easy festival. It is comforting. Babies are much less threatening. Babies make people smile. Christmas is Good New to all Mankind, God with Us, Peace on Earth and Goodwill to All Men. In the Christmas story we see the gentle side of God, the love of God that reaches out to a lost planet.

The Second Coming is darker. Judgement and hardship. This is still the God who is Love acting, the final and irrevocable triumph of good over evil. But it is harder to understand. We cannot even imagine what form it will take. The descriptions in the Bible are in prophetic language, they jump about in time, they are looking dimly into the future. Yet the church has, through the ages, taken comfort in this promise. Suffering will end, God will be in control, and we will be with him.

The contrast between the two sides of Advent, Jesus first coming and his second coming, could not be more stark. Yet putting the two together has a message for us. Advent expands our understanding of Jesus, making us truly in awe of him. It is amazing that we can even think to pray to him, to know him, to dare to think that he cares for us. Yet Christmas shows us that God, in Christ, is God is approachable, knowing, loving. We need the awe and wonder, even the 'fear of God' as it used to be put. But we need to hold that with the sense of God's love for us, his, yes, interest in us, his longing for us to come to him.

Happy New Year!

Jeremy Thake  
St. John & St. Stephen.