

ADVENT EVENINGS



The Revelation to St. John the Divine 1:8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, (I am) the Almighty."

Today is the Feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday of the Christian year. Next week is the First Sunday of Advent then and the beginning of a new year for our Christian calendar. We begin each year preparing ourselves for the birth of the Messiah, and we end each year affirming that Jesus Christ in any number of images as the King of kings and Lord of Lords, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Jesus is proclaimed as the Son of God, and like unto that Son of Man standing before the Ancient of Days, that

mystical figure anticipated by the prophet Daniel in his night visions, the Ancient One as recorded in the apocryphal books of Enoch and Esdras, and in the Revelation of St. John the Divine, the one to whom is given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him around his heavenly throne. His dominion, we affirm, is an everlasting kingdom that shall not pass away, and his reign is one that shall never be destroyed. Even after the great eschatological turmoil, that apocalypse foreseen at the end of time, as we heard in the Gospel of Mark reading last week, the Kingdom of our God will remain forever and ever, unchanging, so we declare.

Now, Christian theologians have long asserted that this Christian Year of ours is based solely upon the historical events of our salvation, upon the birth and death of Jesus of Nazareth, upon his temptation in the wilderness after his baptism by John, the story of his healings and teachings as recorded in the Gospel, upon his arrest and trial under Pontius Pilate, and then his resurrections and ascension, and his promise of coming again. Our liturgical year is a historical calendar of real events in time, church leaders insist, and NOT a calendar set upon the fertility cycle of nature as in the pagan days of old. Jesus' nativity begins the Christian story, they say, such that the season of Advent begins our annual preparations to hear again the Good News of salvation in that humble birth in Bethlehem of Judea, as our new church year begins.

And yet, while Christian theologians celebrate these feasts as historical events, they often ignore the fact that Church in the fourth century tied the unknown date of Jesus' birth to the ancient Roman festival of Dies Natalis Solis Invicti, the birthday of the invincible Sun, the pagan celebration of the Winter solstice, and the longed-for return of the Sun, the return of longer days and warmer seasons, the return of life. In the same way, ancient Christian churches were built facing East, and facing the rising sun, a powerful natural symbol of the Resurrection! Thus, the rhythms of the natural world around us in various ways evoke much of the emotional force of our Christian observances and message. What, for instance, would our Easter celebrations be like without the spring, without the flowering of nature all around us, without all things coming back to life from the dead of winter? And in a similar way, what would our celebration of Christ the King be like without the reminder of the harvest festivals, as in Thanksgiving for us Americans, and without the coming shadows of the long, cold winter which lies ahead?

For the celebration of harvest festivals powerfully remind us all of the great benefits we all receive from the fruits of the earth; how our very lives are sustained by the soil and its bounty, by those long summer days of planting and harvest, by the sweat of our brow, and blessing of rains and the sun, that is, by the natural changes of the seasons of the year.

And now the falling of the leaves from the trees, the wilting of the flowers in our gardens, the dry stalks and stems along the roadside, all speak to us of a year coming to a close; they bear powerful witness for us to the end of the harvest, and foreshadow for us in some way, the death of all things, and the end of Time. There is a very deep underlying psychological relevance to our Christian celebrations, as there are with so many other religions and traditions.

The days are now getting noticeably shorter and shorter for us all as Advent begins. And the now ever earlier arrival of darkness each evening is, I think, a conscious part of our daily life during this time of year. The coming of night and its darkness and cold powerfully reminds each of us, as no mere words ever can, of the cycle of life and the transitory quality of our existence, of the futility of so much human activity, of questions about the meaning and purpose of life, and the mysteriousness of God's ultimate intentions. The evening of our days at this time of year is a place for shadows, and lighted candles, and whispered prayers, a time of quiet silence and reflection. For the autumn clearly speaks to us of the mortality of all things, and thus of our very need for salvation, and thus the birth of a Savior.

No one perhaps has expressed this feeling more eloquently than the great 17th century Anglican bishop, Lancelot Andrewes, one of the original translators of what we call the King James

Bible. In his famous collection of writings, entitled *Preces Privatae* (or "Private Prayers"), he wrote these captivating words:

Gotten past the day
I give Thee thanks, O Lord,
The evening draweth night:
make it bright.
There is an evening, as of the day,
so also of life:
the evening of life is old age:
old age hath overtaken me:
make it bright. . .
Abide with me, O Lord:
for even now it is towards evening with me,
and the day is far spent
of this travailling life.
Let thy strength be perfected
in my weakness (O Lord,
and make it bright).

Let us in this upcoming season of Advent be ever mindful of the shortness and uncertainty of life, and being so reminded, rightfully begin to prepare ourselves, our souls and our bodies, to greet the coming of the long-expected Messiah, foreseen of old. AMEN