

December 2018



Dear Friends,

As this is a double issue newsletter for December and January, it seems right that this article should be on both Advent and Christmas - the waiting for the Christ-Child and then the implications of Christ coming to be among us.

I try not to think about Christmas too much until after the Parish Weekend at the end of November; in the United States most of the shops do not start putting Christmas themed displays up until after Thanksgiving towards the end of November, which achieves the same result. This enables me to start to think of Advent as a time of waiting and anticipating the Christ Child. I was one of those children who could not wait for Christmas and the presents and the fun we would have as a family with our relatives and friends. Then Christmas celebrations finished and we had New Year, after which it was 'Back to School' and enduring the winter weather. Since I became a Christian 40 years ago, and since I have become older and have children of my own, my perspective has changed somewhat. It is normal as a child to think of something coming with great excitement, and then when the excitement dies away to feel a sense of disappointment when the event passes and we have to get 'back to normal' again. But as an adult, I am aware that waiting for something does not mean that we expect that it will automatically mean that everything is wonderful from that time on. Before our children were born we had nine months of waiting, and although parenthood is wonderful, we were under no illusions that it would all be easy; it involved much sacrifice and hard work, especially in the early years.

If we apply this thinking to our Christian lives, and to the teaching of Christmas and Advent, I believe it will help us have a more 'mature' and 'adult' view of Advent and Christmas. The waiting time is a time of preparation - what does it mean that God is at work and wants to come into our lives? Are we willing to take a step back and really reflect on the coming of the Christ-child and whether we are really willing to 'take him in' or we will we be those who say 'no room.' Advent is a time for doing this sort of work - especially among the busyness of the preparations, so that we can truly say with the carol writer, "Cast out or sin and enter in, be born in us today."

But we also need to reflect on the meaning of Christmas and the incarnation - that God wants to be among us and with us. Before the children were born, Karen and I were very excited at the prospect of having our baby live with us. The reality of having a very lively young child upset all of our routines and left Karen permanently tired for at least 4 months afterwards; this meant that we did not automatically feel that great sense of elation at being parents for some time. The reality hit home and continues to do to this day - parenthood is not easy, especially when as humans we make mistakes in the relationships. There are times when we have said- "Is this it? Is this what we had all our hopes and dreams about?" Of course, parenthood is supremely worthwhile, but we have never felt that we have 'arrived' at the ideal solution and got it all worked out.

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In my view, it is the same with the incarnation. If we think that having made a decision to follow Christ that things are all going to work out the way we planned, then we are in for a nasty shock. We make sacrifices for the Lord and for the Church, we make our plans and anticipate, like Advent, but the reality rarely fits our dreams. It is then that we have to make the adult decision to keep going and to put aside 'childish' dreams, and accept that it is God who is now setting our agenda and He wants to see us move on to maturity. He wants us to strive towards something, but then when we have achieved it, not to 'rest on our laurels', but to strive for the next task and goal. It is my experience that far too many Christians do not grow in the Christian lives to the maturity that God wants, because they think that they have arrived at the final goal. We can get disillusioned about faith if we get angry or frustrated that situations in our Christian lives are difficult and ought to be different. If, however, we see the incarnation of Jesus as a continual process to be taken hold of that we must be continually asking God to show us more of Jesus and to allow His rule and reign in our lives more and more, then we will be well on the path to a humble and mature understanding of our Christian lives. We will also become hopefully more and more immune from disillusionment-seeing the peaks and troughs of our experiences and normal stages on the path of life. As Jesus said

"In this world you will have tribulation. But be encouraged! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

This advent hymn can help us as we meditate on Christ's coming among us this Advent and living among us in the Christmas season.

*"Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
All for love's sake becamest poor;
Thrones for a manger didst surrender,
Sapphire-paved courts for stable floor.
Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
All for love's sake becomest poor.*

**Thou who art God beyond all praising,
All for love's sake becamest man;
Stooping so low, but sinners raising
Heavenwards by thine eternal plan.
Thou who art God beyond all praising,
All for love's sake becamest man.**

**Thou who art love beyond all telling,
Saviour and King, we worship thee.
Emmanuel, within us dwelling,
Make us what thou wouldst have us be.
Thou who art love beyond all telling,
Saviour and King, we worship thee."**

In Christian love

Paul