

What is Advent?

Jer 33:14-16; 1 Thess 3:9-13; Lk 21:25-36

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Advent

The practice of Advent is very old – certainly it was observed in 480AD. As a time of preparation for the second coming, it calls us to reflection and amendment of life. For that reason, its liturgical colour is purple as in Lent the other season of repentance.

Advent looks back to the first coming of the Messiah and it looks forward to the second coming. That is the way of future prophecy – it is often like looking at two or more stacked transparencies. You see through one to the other – details of the two are similar and are described together. Another way of thinking about it is that you can look at a view and see distant and near objects. Both are there, they may overlap. You can focus on the near or the far and that changes what you perceive.



Jeremiah

So it is with the passage from Jeremiah: Jeremiah looks ahead through history to the time when the Messiah will come. The King who is promised to Israel.

Jeremiah 33:15 In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land.

A branch will sprout from the line of King David. Although, Jeremiah saw the coming of the Messiah along with his righteousness and his just rule, he was seeing beyond the first coming to the righteous rule of Christ after the second coming. The two views overlap.

As believers, we need to remember the foundations of our belief. We need reminding regularly to keep fresh in our minds the wonder and the faithfulness of God. It is good to look back and remember the saving acts of God in Christ which we call to mind through Advent and Christmas.

In these four weeks, as we remember the coming of Jesus, we would do well to observe how earnest the Jews were in expecting the Messiah. They studied the scriptures carefully and they got much right. Because of the overlap of prophecy, they expected some of the latter fulfilment at the earlier time but that is understandable. How carefully do we look forward to the return of our king?

Looking through the first layer of the transparencies, we can focus on the second which is the latter coming of Christ.

Luke 21

In Luke 21, Jesus tells us something of the last days. Once again, near and far times are overlaid. He started by answering the question about the destruction of the temple and moved on to teach on the end of time. In this chapter, he seems to switch between discussion of the distant future and the nearer events of the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem which occurred in 70AD. The week before last, it was to do with the temple in Mark's account. This week, we have moved onto the last days.

He tells of cataclysmic events affecting the astronomical bodies and what must be great disturbance on our planet causing violent seas. People will be overcome with fear – fainting from terror at what is happening. Most of us have not encountered events to make us so afraid. Jesus tells his followers to be aware of what will happen at that time so they (and perhaps we) will not be surprised. Verse 28: "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." When you know what is happening, when you understand the programme, it helps you cope with the events. When you know, those things signify the coming of your saviour, the lover of your soul, you can stand up and lift your head rather than cower in a hole. When you know the programme you can have hope in the midst of challenging times.

It is rather like a fire drill. We have fire drills to practise for a dangerous event. If it should happen, we have more chance of survival because we have thought about what to do already. We would not be working out what to do in the midst of a frightening situation. Advent then is like an end times drill – a discipline to think about the events of the end times so that if we are involved in them, we will have an awareness and preparation to help us get through those days. When you get into the car, you buckle up your seatbelt. Do you expect to have an accident? No, but it is sensible to prepare because it is possible. It may be that we find ourselves in the last days; it maybe that we won't: it is sensible to prepare.

Jesus assures his followers that these are signs which will indicate the end. It is important to live wisely to be ready for his coming. Don't be weighed down by anxiety, drunkenness or dissipation – we cannot live in both kingdoms, darkness and light. The parable of the fig tree simply means these events he has described warn of the onset of the end as surely as leaves on a fig tree (or the oak outside the chapel here) tell us that summer is approaching.

The generation which sees these events start will see their conclusion – all this is more certain than the world itself. Jesus' words are more secure and certain than the existence of creation itself. Church, it is easy for us to dismiss these warnings or suppress them because they are uncomfortable. But that would be the height of foolishness when the Lord himself puts such an emphasis on their truth and importance.

We are to pray that we are not trapped by those events but can escape through them. Have you ever done that? Let's do it now ...

1 Thessalonians

In the letter to the Church in Thessalonica, Paul was writing to a group of new believers. He had visited, preached, led some to Christ and then had been expelled from the town by the authorities. Paul wrote to them from Corinth to encourage them in their new faith and clarify their misunderstandings. He expressed his joy and thankfulness for them and his concern that their love should overflow to other people.

The second coming was close to the surface of Paul's thinking. Here he is encouraging new converts and he points them towards it. It is not enough that they be loving, but their hearts need to be strengthened so that they will be blameless and holy before God. Being loving isn't enough – we need to be blameless and holy. And for that, God needs to enable us and strengthen us. Then we will be able to stand before him when Jesus comes with all his holy ones. Already Paul is looking to the last days and eternal consequences.

He uses a Greek word, *Parousia*, which means coming or presence. This was the word used when the emperor visited a colony or province. The emperor would approach with great dignity and the people of that place would go out to meet him and honour him.

We saw something of a similar welcoming custom in Africa when the Bishop came to visit them. **{Video}** We have shown you photos and videos of the welcome he received to villages. In each case, the people came out and lead us into their village with singing and dancing. When you are really glad to see someone, you go to meet them rather than wait for them to arrive.

On the subject of such welcomes, it is amazing to see the welcome Paul received in Rome. He came as a prisoner, yet ...

Acts 28:15 The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they travelled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged.

How would ordinary people travel? On foot. How far was it to the Forum of Appius? About as far from Central Rome as we are from Central Auckland. Can you imagine walking to Auckland to meet a visitor and then walking with them back here? Can you imagine how welcome you would feel if people did that for you? Paul thanked God and took courage. It was a good ministry to a prisoner approaching the place of eventual judgement.



So the *Parousia*, was the arrival of the important person to a city.

When the Roman Emperors visited cities a special coin was struck (see the photograph). These coins carried this Latin inscription: *Adventus Augusti*, the coming of Augustus. Did you register that the Latin word for coming is *adventus* from which we get "Advent"?

Paul directed his new converts to think about the Advent of the Jesus again. We too have our thoughts directed to the second advent, the Parousia, of our Lord.

May God strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father at the Advent of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones.