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An Advent Meditation

Richard McBrien | Nov. 29, 2010 Essays in Theology

Advent is a month-long liturgical season, ending with Christmas, that focusses the Church's attention on the threefold coming of Christ: in the past, as the Christ-child of Bethlehem; in the present, as spiritual food and drink in the Eucharist; and in the future, as the One who brings history to a gloriously redemptive end.

[**Editor's Note:** Fr. Richard McBrien is recuperating from back surgery. Until he fully recovers, which we expect by the end of this school semester, we will be running "encore presentations" from Fr. McBrien's column archives. This column dates from November 1997.]

Advent should not be of interest to Christians alone. Its spirit of hopeful expectation taps into the highest and noblest of human aspirations and into the conviction, deeply rooted in the human heart, that things will somehow work out for the best in the end--for one's personal life and the lives of our loved ones, and for the well-being of humankind itself.

There is a fine line, however, between hopefulness and presumption. The New Testament reminds us of the fool who presumes that his or her worldly security and prosperity are never-ending.

Jesus spoke of the rich man whose land produced an abundant harvest--so much, in fact, that he didn't have enough space in which to store it all. He decided, therefore, to tear down his barns and build larger ones. Thereafter, he thought, he could "rest, eat, drink, and be merry" (Luke 12:19).

But God said to the rich man, "You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?" (12:20).

In light of this parable, Jesus warned his disciples about their own attachment to worldly goods, urging them not to worry about what they would eat or wear. "For life is more than food and the body more than clothing" (12:23).

"If God so clothes the grass in the field that grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will [God] not much more provide for you, O you of little faith?" (12:28).

"All the nations of the world," he continued, "seek for these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek [God's] kingdom, and these other things will be given you besides. Do not be afraid any longer...for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom" (12:30,32).

Confidence and hope. But alongside these is the need for vigilance, lest hope be corrupted by presumption. "Gird your loins and light your lamps," Jesus said, "and be like servants who await their master's return from a wedding, ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks."

"Blessed are those servants whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival." What will that master do? Amazingly, according to Jesus, the master (who is God) will "gird himself, have [his servants] recline at table,

and proceed to wait on them" (12:35-37).

But there will be other servants who, upon learning that the master's arrival has been delayed, will begin to beat those servants who are below them in authority, and then eat and drink to the point of drunkenness. What of them?

The master of those servants, Jesus warned, will come "on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour and will punish [them] severely and assign [them] a place with the unfaithful" (12:46).

"You also must be prepared," Jesus concluded, "for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come" (12:40).

The spirit of Advent is meant to inform every human life, not just Christians alone, and certainly not Catholics alone. It should touch the agonies and longings of every human heart.

The family torn by conflict. The abused spouse. The battered child. The troubled youth. The unemployed breadwinner. The aged and helpless grandparent. The dying loved one. The bereaved. The person of color, scarred by bigotry. The gay and the lesbian, marginalized by prejudice. The poor and the powerless, shorn of dignity and hope.

Advent has to do, literally, with a "coming toward" (ad-veniens, in the Latin). Advent reminds us that we are "coming toward" a richer and fuller future, made possible by the Creator of us all. ("Do not be afraid any longer...for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.")

On the other hand, that final outpouring of justice and truth, of mercy and forgiveness, is also "coming toward" us, from God's side to our own. Our posture, therefore, should be one of hopeful expectation. But not of idle presumption.

Even as we hope and pray for the blessings of that Kingdom, we are called to share what we have, however meager our resources, with those in even greater need, and to work for justice for others, whatever the personal cost.

The message of Advent is that the blessings of the Kingdom will "come toward" us only to the extent that we "come toward" those most in need of our love and support.

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