

Pondering Advent 2014

*The Advent bells call out 'Prepare,
Your world is journeying to the birth
Of God made Man for us on earth.'*

*And how, in fact, do we prepare
The great day that waits us there -
For the twenty-fifth day of December,
The birth of Christ?*

- John Betjeman

This question of how we are to prepare within our coming season of Advent is something we need to ponder if we desire to fully receive the blessings of Christmas... ponder as truly as Mary pondered her own Annunciation. What are *we* called towards in this season of Advent? What do *we* wait for?

Though I love the season of Easter time with the coming freshness of spring and the growing light of our days after a long time of darkness, the season of Advent has a feeling to it that is just as hopeful and joy filled as Easter, even though the time of Advent *is* the darkest period of our year. In the weeks of Advent we start a journey

out of the darkness that has been slowly enveloping us in the early winter months. This is a journey that begins symbolically with the Annunciation to Mary of the promise and coming of Christ, and culminates with his arrival through Mary. Mary ponders... Mary delivers. The images of Advent are always delightful to ponder in themselves, especially its beginning (The Annunciation) and its end (The Nativity). In Fra Angelico's 'Annunciation' we are given a foreshadow of the light that is being promised by the angel of God through Fra Angelico's rich use of bright colours, with Saint



'Annunciation' Fra Angelico



Adoration of the Shepherds - Giorgione

Dominic contemplating in the background. In Giorgione's nativity scene we are still conscious of the darkness that we have been delivered from through the symbol of the dark cave, but newly aware of the light that has dawned and is soon to envelop us... the light of Christ that now shines upon the faces of Mary, Joseph and the shepherds and that is beginning to shine outward into the world.

But again the question:

*how, in fact, do we prepare
The great day that waits us there -
For the twenty-fifth day of December,
The birth of Christ?*

How can we enter into this beauty of the Advent season, into its promise? What does it mean to wait in expectation and anticipation of such a promise? Advent should be a joyful season marked by longing for deliverance even though we are presently in the midst of darkness and cold temperatures. It is the season of our church in which we are reminded that we will be delivered from the tyranny of injustice and all the evils of

our world through the arrival and sacrifice of Christ. It is a time of preparing ourselves for this deliverance through hopeful, joy-filled prayer. The hope of our prayers at this time of year is not for a lessening of pain and suffering, or for better days ahead, but more fundamentally, for lives of greater dignity, meaning, and possibility through the love and care of God. Beyond Advent we will continue to suffer as human beings, as Christ himself suffered. But through the rich fullness of our experiences of Advent these present and future sufferings can be borne with greater dignity, meaning, and hope. Through the promised light of Christ that comes to us in this time of year we can see a new way in which to live our lives - lives lived with greater concern and compassion for those who suffer around us.

This deeper dimension of life that advent offers us is captured by another image, the image of Anne Frank living in an attic prison waiting for the war to end so she can live her life again. It may be odd to equate the meaning and experiences of Advent with the experiences of a young 20th century Jewish girl at first sight. But Advent, as we know, derives precisely from the experiences of another young Jewish girl that the images above clearly show. Looked at more closely Mary and Anne Frank do have much in common for us to ponder in this season of hopeful waiting. In the cramped quarters of a small attic, from which she cannot escape out of fear in the certainty of persecution, a young Anne is pregnant with her own longing, forced to wait for deliverance of the hope and future promise which is growing within her and deliverance from the moral evil that surrounds her... waiting for the war to end.

The sun is shining, the sky is a deep blue, there is a lovely breeze and I'm longing – so longing – for everything. To talk, for freedom, for friends, to be alone. And I do so long... to cry! I feel as if I'm going to burst, and I know that it would get better with crying; but I can't, I'm restless, I go from one room to the other, breathe through the crack of a closed window, feel my heart beating, as if it is saying, "Can't you satisfy my longings at last?"

What gives Anne's life advental meaning for us today is what Anne *grows* to long for while waiting for the war to end. In her time of waiting she grows better prepared to meet her struggles, to see her life within them with greater meaning, and learns to depend upon God with greater fidelity and hopefulness... in her waiting within the confines of a small attic she grows from being a self-centred adolescent to an inspiring other-centred young woman aware of others' suffering and God's healing presence within it. In her pregnant waiting and longing here is what Anne becomes:

Yesterday evening, before I fell asleep, who should suddenly appear before my eyes but Lies!

I saw her in front of me, clothed in rags, her face thin and worn. Her eyes were very big and she looked so sadly and reproachfully at me that I could read in her eyes: 'Oh Anne, why have you deserted me? Help, oh, help me, rescue me from this hell!'

I misjudged her and was too young to understand her difficulties. What the poor girl must have felt like, I know; I know the feeling so well myself!

Sometimes, in a flash, I saw something of her life, but a moment later I was selfishly absorbed again in my own pleasures and problems. It was horrid of me to treat her as I did, and now she looked at me, oh so helplessly, with her pale face and imploring eyes. If only I could help her!

Oh, God, that I should have all I could wish for and that she should be seized by such a terrible fate. I am not better than she; she, too, wanted to do what was right, why should I be chosen to live and she probably to die?

Oh, Lies, I hope that, if you live until the end of the war, you will come back to us and that I shall be able to take you in and do something to make up for the wrong I did you... But when I am able to help her again, then she will not need my help so badly as now. I wonder if she ever thinks of me; if so, what would she feel?

Oh, if only You could tell her that I think lovingly of her and with sympathy, perhaps that would give her greater endurance.

I wonder if Lies has real faith in herself, and not only what has been thrust upon her? I don't even know, I never took the trouble to ask her!

Lies, Lies, if only I could take you away, if only I could let you share all the things I enjoy. It is too late now, I can't help, or repair the wrong I have done. But I shall never forget her again, and I shall always pray for her.

Her longing is still present within her, but no longer is she longing for herself and her own needs. Now she longs with empathy for others. In her waiting, in her imprisonment, in her hopeful expectation, Anne has come to more fully feel the needs and sufferings of others. With the compassion and empathetic understanding that has grown within her in her time of waiting Anne has turned to God, praying for those in her life who suffer.

Like Mary, in her own way Anne gave birth to something for all of us to take heart in in an often dark world. During her long time of waiting Anne grew to give spiritual birth to an inextinguishable witness of hope and human light despite an encroaching darkness that would physically end her life. Despite all that she struggled with, and all that she would go through in her final days, imagine the spiritual strength to say this - words we are likely familiar with:

In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again.

In its very essence, is this not the spirit of Advent... and the spirit of St. Ignatius? Though it is a dark world that surrounds us God is still present within it. We may have to look real hard sometimes, but God *is* present. How do we prepare for the return of the peace and tranquility of God's presence in our world during this time of Advent... a peace and tranquility that Anne Frank nearly lost hope in ever feeling again in the darkness of the war? Like Anne, in empathetically being with others in their own sufferings and painful times of longing, despite how hard it can be... Like Mary, in opening ourselves to the annunciation of God in our own lives in the depths of the night... in being prayerfully mindful of what God is calling *us* towards. Without such compassion for others and openness towards God the darkness will continue, bringing with it confusion, misery, and death. Advent calls us beyond such a world towards prayerful openness and compassion. Such a disposition of faith does not come immediately, but something we must hope for and pray for over many dark nights... that we may come to generously receive those around us, and God's loving presence through Christ for us.

Have a Blessed Advent 2014 CLC Canada
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