



Advent Is Coming

by Jonathan Aitken

LATER THIS MONTH we start Advent, a spiritual season rich in visual and musical images. Its contemporary manifestations include pop-up calendars, corporate carol services, school Nativity plays, and endless renditions of “Joy to the World” or “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas.” Along with tinsel, pictures of Santa with his reindeer, and early shopping for presents, these superficialities bring to mind Garrison Keillor’s line: “A lovely thing about Christmas is that it’s compulsory, like a thunderstorm, and we all go through it together.”

But there is an alternative to the boisterous countdown of the weeks leading up to Christmas,

and it’s called Advent. The older and deeper symbols of this season include readings from Isaiah and performances of Handel’s *Messiah* and of the earliest Advent composition known as the *Great O’s* or originally *Antiphonae Majores*. These were poetic chants written in the seventh century for the early church’s pre-Christmas liturgy. Each begins with a vocative “O” connecting ancient Hebrew invocations for the first coming of the expected Savior of Israel with petitions for his return in the second coming.

Today’s Christian worshippers are familiar with the *Great O’s* as incorporated into the hymn “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” Each of the seven antiphones covers the longings expressed for both advents, as for example in:

*O Come, Thou key of David, come
And open wide our heavenly home*

These words are one of many indications that this is a season of haunting themes, mysteries, prophecies, and poetry. In these next few weeks we are called to prepare for the arrival, the *adventus* of God, who enters history in the person of Jesus Christ. It is both an individual and a collective preparation, for he comes in our own experience of him and is yet to come in the fulfillment of all things.

Collectively Advent is full of powerful symbolism. As a young cathedral choirboy I recall being overwhelmed by Wesley’s hymn “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending” and even more by singing the treble part of the *Messiah’s* opening chorus, “And the Glory, the Glory of the Lord Shall Be Revealed.”



Revelation is an essential ingredient of Advent at whose heart is a deep yearning of the soul, waiting for the response of the God who comes. That sense of longing is shared by many, of all faiths and of none. For there is in humanity a general sense of fracture coupled with a yearning for a time when hurts will be healed, wrongs will be righted, when peace will replace violence and war. Most of the time we paper over the cracks of such feelings and get along with our lives quite cheerfully. But from time to time that sense of fracture becomes very real as we discover inexplicably bleak winters of the spirit. We feel powerless, unable to change the situation or change our own heart. God can seem far away and inaccessible. At such moments we long for God to reveal himself. If only he would come to us. In the words of Woody Allen: "If only God would give me some clear sign. Like making a large deposit in my name in a Swiss bank."

In the absence of the miraculous creation of a large numbered account in a Swiss bank (plus the second miracle of it being a bank that has not been pressured by the IRS into disclosing the identities of its customers), what should those of us hoping for a sign do in Advent—the season of waiting?

One of the lessons of Advent is that God does respond to those who wait on him in hope. However, it can be a response that comes neither on our terms nor suited to our timetables. The Gospel reading for Advent Sunday reminds us of this forcefully:

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake. (Mark 13:33-37)

A possible alternative to keeping awake is to be woken up in Advent. In my own life this has happened more than once. Those choirboy experiences of beautiful Advent music were one such instance. Although this column began with some gentle mockery of corporate carol services and school Nativity plays, I have occasionally felt holiness calling from beneath the outer carapace of corniness. Advent can

be the season of divine rustlings and whisperings even amidst the secular trappings of a commercialized Christmas. And as the old saying goes: "If you don't listen to God's whispers, one day you will have to listen to God's shouts."

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I AM A MEMBER OF A CHURCH in London, St. Matthew's Westminster, whose vicar, Philip Chester, has a special vocation and scholarship for the spirituality of Advent. In the last few years he regularly wakes me up with stimulating sermons and readings that are the equivalent of Advent whispers. Last year he recommended two fine Advent books: Stephen Cottrell's *Do Nothing: Christmas Is Coming* and Maria Boulding's *The Coming of God*. Both authors encourage their readers to do less and ponder more during Advent. This pattern of patient reflection follows the example of the Virgin Mary, who after the Annunciation "pondered these things in her heart."

Another part of the original Advent pattern is the play on light and darkness. These contrasting forces are emphasized by the Anglican collect for Advent, read daily in the weeks before Christmas. It opens with the majestic words:

Almighty God give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which Thy son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility.

Humility is the key to our Advent preparations for the one who is coming. By penitently clearing away the debris of our lives and by prayerfully waiting in hope we can fulfill Isaiah's call "to make straight in the desert a highway for our God." ❁

Jonathan Aitken is most recently author of John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace (*Crossway Books*). His biographies include Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed (*Doubleday*) and Nixon: A Life, now available in paperback (*Regnery*).