

Advent Carol Service 2018

It may feel like 2018 is beginning to hasten to its end, but this end is a beginning – because today is the first Sunday of the new liturgical year. Liturgy simply means worship, and the idea of the liturgical year is that true Christian worship quite properly moves through different seasons and what one can only call moods. There is a time for awe – Epiphany; a time for mourning – Lent; a time for dancing – Easter. There's long, long 'ordinary time' – all those Sundays after Trinity, for like life itself the spiritual life is mostly ordinary: we can't be at the extremes all the time.

The idea behind the liturgical year is that worshipping through all these times and seasons, with all their different emphases, creates a well-balanced church, well balanced Christians: people whose hearts and minds and imaginations – their souls – are shaped by all of the truth: its sadness and its joy, the hope and the tragedy.

Jesus, of course, didn't leave us the liturgical year ready-made. But it did take shape relatively quickly post Jesus. There is a tradition that St. Peter kept the first Advent Sunday service, but like many traditions it is not terribly trustworthy. However, by the middle of the second century we have a reference to Christmas in the city of Antioch being celebrated on the 25th of December. This was presumably fairly widespread because when the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity legal in 313 AD, he also made 25th December the official date of Christmas. And we also have evidence that from very early times, a period of special prayer and fasting preceded Christmas: Advent. So the season we start today is one that has been handed down by the church from the earliest times.

What does it mean that the liturgical year starts with Advent? At one level, it simply reflects the shape of the Christian story: during Advent, we prepare for the celebration of the birth of Christ – for the rest of the year, we follow the course of his life, death, and resurrection, his ascension and sending of his Spirit. There's a deeper and rather more exciting reason, though, why Advent comes first. And given that this is such a musical kind of service, music provides the best analogy for explaining that reason. Advent functions, as it were, like the key signature for the rest of the year. All the different movements of the year, and all the individual notes, are only played right if they are struck in this particular key – if there is something of Advent about all of them.

And that is because Advent was never just about preparing for Christmas. It was never just about remembering an event in the past. Advent is about the future, about the coming of God in justice and glory. 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence', says Isaiah. 'Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with power and great glory', says Jesus in Mark. Our readings are about the future, about the coming of God – and so is the season of Advent. And so, indeed, is Christianity, and so is every Eucharist. Yes, we remember, we tell Jesus' story and do what he did, in memory of him – but we do it all looking forward. Remember the words of the eucharistic prayer:

*rejoicing in his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension,
and looking for his coming in glory,
we celebrate this memorial of our redemption.*

Looking for his coming in glory. That is the key signature of Christian worship – of everything about Christianity. We tell the story of the past not for its own sake, but because it tells of the future – because who Jesus was and what Jesus did is always understood by the New Testament as not finished yet. The resurrection of Christ is just the beginning, just the first-fruits as St. Paul put it, of what God has planned for his creation. The stupendous glory, the dazzling beauty, the mystery of forgiveness, of justice and healing which is the risen Jesus – that, Christians dare to hope, will enfold us all. Our history, all withered and faded like Isaiah said, will be made resurrection. That is the Gospel: not just that our sins are forgiven, not even that we're going to Heaven – but that the whole creation will be made new: that the end of all things is not decay and loss, but glory – unspeakable, joyous glory. And that faith comes not from ignoring pain and suffering – not from avoiding crucifixions – but through knowing that even through them, even through them, God works this miracle. From the deadness of Christ's tomb, glory flares – and it will set the universe ablaze.

Think on that: let that sink into our souls – and we will indeed have a Gospel this Christmas.

Peter Waddell