

Advent Sunday.

The word Advent has its origins in the Latin word *adventus* which means coming and, though there have been changes in the way it is celebrated over the centuries, essentially it is nowadays a preparation for the coming of the birth of Jesus at Christmas, but also a reminder of his second coming in judgement in the last days. It is the beginning of the Church's year, a solemn time, like Lent, for considering the meaning of Christ's birth, and his ministry. Also, like Lent, it was originally forty days long and, though not observed everywhere as a fast, at least a time for restricting the pleasures of the flesh.

Later it was shortened to start on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day, though in secular terms, with Advent Calendars counting down the days to 25th December, with little treats behind each window, it seems to have been formalized as starting on December 1st! (Little treats? Last year not only did I see those with small chocolates, but also one which had a small can of beer for each day and another with a split of champagne behind each window!)

In the Church the four Sundays of Advent have the themes of, 1st. Sunday – The prophets, 2nd. Sunday – The Bible, 3rd. Sunday – Mary and 4th. Sunday – John the Baptist. They are also sometimes referred to as the Sunday of Hope, the Sunday of Peace, the Sunday of Love and the Sunday of Joy. In many churches they may be marked with an Advent Ring of candles, one for each week as we count down to Christmas and usually an extra for Christmas Day.

When I was a choirboy in 1945 and for several years after, the themes of the sermons were traditionally Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell, though these seem to have fallen out of favour in more modern times. Sermons in those days always seemed to be at least twenty five minutes to half an hour long and the lights in the church were turned off apart from the one over the pulpit. It put the preacher in the spotlight and there were some fiery sermons preached to put the congregation in the fear of God (not that we choirboys ever really listened carefully, we all had torches and comics under the hymn book shelves to keep us quiet). These sermon themes were meant to concentrate the minds of the congregations on the second coming of Christ, and to remind them to prepare for that day in the way they lived their lives. Some of the preachers on the 4th. Sunday of Advent could really let rip on the horrors of Hell. In later years I came to different approach to this subject, largely because of insights from other Christians. Two in particular stick in my mind, the first from a wise old Catholic priest who told me, "Since God is infinitely just, there has to be a Hell for those who have rejected Him, but since God is also infinitely merciful, no one has to be there." The second was in the writings of Mother Julian of Norwich, the mediaeval visionary. In one of her visions she visited Hell and reported, "There was nobody present, not even a Jew!" That is a very profound statement for a Christian of her times.

However you spend your time during the Advent season, and the Covid 19 lockdowns could well restrict that, do take time to consider what it is we are preparing to celebrate at the end of the season, and what it is, as Christians we look forward to and should be preparing our lives for, the coming of Christ in the last days.

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