

First Sunday of Advent

How do we keep Advent? How do we celebrate this season of expectation that is so counter-cultural, a season of quiet waiting instead of frantic buying? This morning we were shown an excellent way of doing so, through the Collect for the First Sunday of Advent, a prayer that came near the beginning of the service. It was written by Thomas Cranmer, the man who created the First Book of Common Prayer in 1549. From 1662 through 1979 that collect was recommended for *every day* in Advent, not just for the first Sunday. In other words, for Anglicans it came to represent the full meaning of Advent. So I'm going to pray it again, this time in slightly more familiar language.

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Right away at the beginning the prayer acknowledges that God is Almighty, all-powerful, the one who gives us all that we have. That's appropriate. God is great and we are not. So what do we do right after acknowledging that? We have the nerve to tell God what to do! That about sums up human existence, doesn't it? We talk about prayer as petition, but there often isn't a lot of "please" in prayer; usually it's "do, make, give"! Even the prayer Jesus taught us, the Lord's Prayer, is full of imperatives: give, forgive, lead us not, deliver us. They are all variations on the same theme, which is "help!" My sister tells me that one of her most frequent prayers is, "I could use a little help right now, God!"

And what do we ask God to give us? Grace. That one word characterizes all of Advent. Paul uses it as the first word in the body of his letter to the church in Corinth. "Grace and peace" he writes, combining the traditional Greek and Jewish letter salutations. Paul then gives thanks for the Corinthians because God's grace was given to them in Christ Jesus, citing some examples. In fact, this is a remarkably warm beginning to a letter that will take the Corinthians to task for the many ways they have fallen short of who they should be as recipients of God's grace.

Grace is what carries us through this life. It was sheer grace that brought God to earth in the form of a human child. By God's grace, we will be ready when Christ comes again. God is faithful, Paul insists. God will strengthen all of us to the end.

The Collect asks for God's grace so that we can cast away the works of darkness – throw them out like so much refuse – and instead put on the armor of light. Darkness and light are good metaphors for Advent, and it is not coincidence that we celebrate Christmas just past the longest night of the year. Note that this light provides *armor*, an odd concept for something that can't actually be worn, as though the light around us chases away all of the demons who would pull us back into the darkness.

We ask for this light now, in this mortal life, so that we may be prepared for immortal life. Note that the Collect prays that we may *rise* to the life immortal. There's the implicit assumption that when we die, we die; we aren't carried right away into the presence of Jesus, or held in the arms of God, or living among the stars, or any number of things you'd heard or I've preached at funeral sermons. The New Testament description of dying is "falling asleep," and this Collect is true to that idea. Only at the general resurrection do we rise again. One of my favorite theologians, N.T. Wright, calls this life *after* "life after death."

Perhaps the most intriguing part of the Collect is the description of Jesus. On this earth, Jesus came to *visit* us in great humility. He didn't stay long. His active ministry lasted three years at most. During that time he acted exactly the opposite of how everyone expected the Messiah to act. He had no army or weapons. He had no earthly authority. He began his life on earth as a helpless child, and ended by allowing himself to be put to the most ignominious death. That's why it always baffles me when Christians seek earthly power for the sake of Christ, or support people in power who violate the humility and selflessness that characterized Jesus. I believe that Jesus clearly preferred the company of the poor, the lost, and the marginalized. I rarely see him very comfortable among the rich and powerful; usually he's calling them to account, and they don't like it.

And that ties in with the last part of the Collect. We believe that Jesus Christ will come again, this time in majesty, not humility, and judge both the living and the dead. It reminds me once again of last week's reading from the Gospel of Matthew, that famous parable of the sheep and the goats. Lately I've been rereading the sayings of the desert fathers and mothers, those men and women of the fourth and fifth centuries who fled into the desert of Egypt when Christianity became the imperial religion. With respect to that parable, one of the monks told his followers to assume that they were goats, not sheep. I rather like that. If you remember the parable, no one knew whether they were doing the work of Christ or not until judgment day came. If I assume that I am a goat, then I know I've been blind to how I can serve Christ, and will seek to amend my ways. Many of the holiest of the desert monks said on their deathbed that they had not yet begun to serve Christ, and that outlook made them ever more committed to prayer and to service. They were looking for God's grace every day, every moment of their lives.

That's the lesson of the Gospel reading from Mark this morning. Too many people on hearing that passage get caught up in the various signs – either trying to connect what is said to actual events in today's world, or dismissing it all as a bunch of superstitious poppycock. Those who look for signs and omens also seem to be intent on deciding who is going to be saved and who will be damned. Jesus says quite clearly that only God knows what is going on. No one else. Our job is not to predict when or wonder who will be "left behind." Our job is to keep awake. Keep working for the kingdom. Keep doing what Jesus would have us do.

So one way to keep focused on Advent is to use the wisdom of Thomas Cranmer and past prayer books and read today's collect every day for the remainder of Advent. It's in your bulletin, or you can find it on page 211 of the prayer book. Pray for God's grace to help you throw away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Prepare for the celebration of Christ's visit, so that you will be ready when he comes again. Be ready to rise to life immortal. It may seem very dark now. But God is faithful, and before long, the Light will once again blaze among us. Keep awake, beloved, so that you, too, will be warmed and held and surrounded by that Light.

[Advent 1: Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37.]