

An Advent Gift List

First Sunday of Advent (A)

Isaiah 2.1-5/Psalm 122/Romans 13.8-14/Matthew 24.32-44

St. Paul's Church, Halifax

2 December 2007

~Paul H. Friesen~

I have a habit of taking my watch off and sliding it into my left pocket before Sunday worship begins. So, if I asked any one who knew this to tell me *what time it is* right now, they would of course tell me how many minutes it is past 10.00 a.m. But there are other ways of telling *what time it is* right now. And the most important way to tell time is to tell what 'time' means right now.

What time is it right now? The Christian answer is given in this morning's Scriptures. About 1950 years ago the Apostle Paul told the church in Rome what time it was. 'You know what time it is,' he said, 'how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.' This is how we begin the church year. We tell each other it is morning; that it's time to wake up. It's Advent Sunday.

St. Bernard (the Christian writer, not the woolly dog!) said: 'Diligently seek out the reason of this season of Advent, asking namely: *Who is it that is coming?*'¹ In other words the whole point of telling each other to wake up is that *Christ is coming to visit us.*

We don't know when—Jesus warned us long ago in the Gospel of Matthew. 'Keep awake...for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming... Therefore you must be ready, for the Son of Man (the Lord, Christ the King) is coming at an unexpected hour.' In other word, we should *always be ready.*

The first Christians, like us, knew that they worshipped Jesus Christ, the Lord, who had been born, and had lived, died, risen and returned to God the Father—for our salvation. They called this the *first* Advent (or coming) of Christ. But they also talked about a *second* Advent of Christ—when Christ would come to put things right and reign as King over the whole world. They celebrated both Advents, like we do. And like them, we live out our Christian lives between these two Advents (or arrivals) of Christ.

If this is true, shouldn't we live every day as if Christ had *just come* and was *about to return?* We should! But we Christians have for many centuries needed the season of Advent to remind us, at least once a year, of something we keep forgetting.

¹ In *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, ed. M.F. Toal (London: Longmans, Green, 1957), vol.1, p.21.

The fact of the first coming and the promise of the second coming of Christ change everything that happens in between the two. This is what St. Paul said to the Romans in our reading this morning. 'Let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness ...not in quarrelling and jealousy.'

I wish there was softer way to say this, but the first Sunday of Advent welcomes us into a season of divine judgement—that is, we are to know the truth about how we are living.

The colour of the season is purple, which is the colour of Monarchs and Emperors, the colour of majesty. But they can't really arrive anywhere without bringing judgement—they can't come without asking us to make wrongs into rights. They can't come, and Christ can't come, without asking why some have food and others don't, why some are respected and others have their faces ground into the earth. *The fact of the first coming and the promise of the second coming of Christ change everything that happens in between the two.*

But we are able to prepare for Christ's second coming on the strength of his first coming. To put it another way; we are able to change our ways because Christ has already given himself to us in the cradle and on the cross—divine grace has forgiven our sins and welcomed us into Christ's presence. And so we want to remember this, and prepare ourselves, our church, and our world for when Christ is coming for good. This has been what Christians have been doing from the very beginning.

But we aren't supposed to greet Christ on Christmas Day as terrified criminals. We are meant to greet Christ on Christmas Day as those who have allowed themselves to be questioned by God's justice, and those who have been assured that Christ came and that Christ comes to set things right between us.

The fact of the first Advent and the promise of the second Advent of Christ change everything that happens in between the two.

But there is another thing to think about—how exactly are we going to live these next few weeks of the Advent Season? *I think that Advent is the season to remember Christ's first coming and to practice for Christ's second coming with a short list of things to do—we have twenty-three days.* In twenty-three days we will be welcoming Christ in the manger here at St. Paul's. What will we have done to prepare ourselves? We are, in fact, doing some things already.

As a worshipping community of Christians we have just heard the Apostle Paul say: 'The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.' How are we going to do that? Like most people I find it hard to hold a concept like 'the armour of light' in my head as I go through my week. So I particularly like the advent wreath I found well-used when I arrived here at St. Paul's a few years ago.

The religious use of trees and wreaths was around before Christianity came along, but Christians have for years the advent wreath is a great place to begin thinking about 'putting on the armour of light'. I think of the wreath as a way of marking time on the Christian calendar, a spiritual way of telling time. The closer we get to Christ in the cradle, the more candles are lit until the day arrives and all five are blazing. And so as we can ask week by week: How are we better prepared for the coming of Christ? How have we practiced for Christ's arrival?

Well, if the wreath helps us count-down to the coming of Christ other things in our worship will us prepare as well—worship like we are offering right now (with extra services), and other types of worship too: the preparing of the church for Christmas, the giving of extra volunteer time and money, the Christmas outreach programmes of our church and our Sunday School, and those things we will each do to get ready for Christmas.

I would like to close this sermon by making a suggestion about the things we will each do to prepare for the coming of Christ—things that may remain unknown even to our friends and family. I would like to make a suggestion about what we might do to prepare for Christ in the time available on the Christian advent calendar.

We all will be carrying lists in our pockets or purses the next few weeks—reminders of a Christmas gift for special people, people God has put in our lives for different reasons. And if they involve going into shops or shopping malls we will here how many shopping days are left before Christmas. I would suggest an Advent shopping list for each of us—it may have only three or two or even one things on it, things to be done before Christmas to prepare for Christ.

This list will be different for each, but the point will be to make it as urgent as the gifts on our list that must be found before Christmas. We have twenty-three days till Christmas. What will we do with them?

Our lives can be changed—my life was changed in one small way, not in Advent and not by a Christian, but it was changed. In our *psalm* this morning we heard the *psalmist* say to anyone who would hear him: 'For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.'

This insight came to me, and so one of my habits changed, though I don't think it began in Advent.

I was a Baptist minister in my mid-20s hired at the same time as a police officer of the same age to work as Probation & Parole Officers to work in a pretty rough part of Toronto. Our office was at the corner of Parliament and Gerrard. Ron, who became my friend, wasn't particularly Christian. He had a great mind though he had some pretty wacky religious ideas. But what really impressed me was his habit.

No matter how rough or tough or angry one of his clients was Ron would come out of his office upon their arrival, look them in the eye, courteously, and shake their hand like they were colleagues or business associates. He respected the humanity in which

God had created them—without fail—no matter what they had done. I don't think I have been as good as Ron was or as consistent as he is, but it changed me. And I remember this when I see someone begging on the street or asking for help in the back of our church. I can't always help them. But if I fail to offer them the divine respect of returning their greeting and looking into their face, I remember Ron's example.

What will be on our Advent shopping list, our spiritual gift list? There is no limit! It might be to extend forgiveness to a friend or relative who has hurt us. It might be to pray for an enemy in distress. It might be to ask forgiveness of someone we have harmed. It might be to pray for the health and growth of the 'other congregation' in this parish. It might be to pray for the good of Pentecostals, and Roman Catholics and Baptists in our city. It might be to begin to make right an injustice we have been responsible for in some way.

But there is at least on thing we can put on our list, one thing we can do by Christmas Eve, whether or not anyone knows about it besides God, or maybe one or two others it might involve.

The fact of the first Advent and the promise of the second Advent of Christ change everything that happens in between the two. This is the great theological truth for Advent Sunday, the very first Sunday of the season which prepares for the coming of Christ.

Advent is the season to remember Christ's first coming and to practice for Christ's second coming with a short list of things to do. This is the great, practical spiritual truth which will make us ready for Christmas Day.

But we should never forget that Christ has already changed us by coming to us in the cradle, and living for us, and dying for us on the cross, and rising for us into new life.

Every morning of Advent, wherever we will awake from sleep the promise of Christ being with us is as real as us the candles burning in our Advent wreath. We will wait for Christ to come to us each day, but not as those without hope.

The prophet Isaiah said:

'The Lord shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks...O come...let us walk in the light of the Lord.'

What a gift we all have this morning; twenty-three days to wear 'the armour of light' as we come in and go out of worship right here at St. Paul's this Advent. Amen.