

Advent II 2008
St. Marc's Centre œcuménique
Grenoble, France
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I am sure that you all know that the feast of Christmas on December 25th was not the original day for celebrating Jesus' birthday. The first Christians celebrated it on what we now call Epiphany. The eminent scholar of the New Testament Kenneth Bailey, who spent a life studying the cultural context of Jesus' time, estimates that Jesus was actually born in the late spring.

The reason we celebrate Jesus' birthday, what our ancestors called Christ's Mass, on December 25th is that the early church wanted an alternative to the Saturnalia feast, the wild winter solstice celebration of the Roman Empire. On December 25th, in particular, Saturnalia celebrants were given a pass from their marriage vows for the day. You can see that Christians needed something powerful to compensate the faithful for giving up that sort of party.

Later on, the church invented the Church Year, an idea we borrowed from the Jews, as a way of telling the story of Jesus and his people by marking the change of seasons. Advent was designated as a time to hear the Good News again in preparation to welcome Jesus once more into our lives.

I love this season of Advent, whose gentle hymns and candle ceremonies tend to get drowned out by today's Christmas-present hubbub. It really is counter-cultural, not in a May-68 kind of way, but in presenting us with a stark alternative to the commercial realities of this time of year.

Instead of buying and getting, Advent is about *not* getting. It is about taking stock of our need of God, and I've never been able to do that in a department store. And it is also for a brief few weeks an invitation to rediscover our faith. Not the doctrine of the church so much as the feeling of trusting God, the decision, that needs to be reiterated often, to believe that this story about a man named Jesus that we are starting to tell all over again, really is also about me. All people of faith experience doubt. Even Jesus had his moments, not just in the Garden of Gethsemane but also at home in Nazareth, where Mark tells us he marvelled at people's lack of faith and his inability to heal them.

Doubt is God's way of inviting us to grow in faith. I wish it were more fun, but there you have it...

So Advent is about asking ourselves, where is God now for me? Who is Jesus for me? What does it mean that he came among us because the Holy Spirit created him? And while we ask these questions about the Trinity, there are also our memories of Christmas past. Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens's tale *A Christmas Carol* confronts his shadows of times past, some pleasant, some not. I think we resonate with him because we all have remembrances of Christmas—some pleasant, some not. Advent is a time to reflect on these and how they affect my faith in God.

During Advent we hear from Isaiah, the great prophet of a second chance, from John the Baptist, that wild hairy fellow telling us to get ready, and from that surprisingly-

grounded teenage girl, St. Mary the Virgin. They each tell us to hope, to be ready for God's future, to take a chance that the last word in your life will be Love, love that knows no boundaries, no end.

And there are those good old Advent hymns: "On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry/Announces that the Lord is nigh." He's near, he's coming any minute. "O come O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel/That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear./Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel."

Emmanuel as you know means, "God with us." These songs are about longing, longing for God to come to us, who realize once again how much we need God, how empty we are. And they assure us that God will fill our need, fill us with life and love and joy. How God will be with us, is with us—Emmanuel.

When I was ordained bishop over seven years ago now, the preacher said something that I have found to be very true. The greatest and most hidden gift of being a bishop, he said, is that the more honours and beautiful vestments and honorifics they pile on you, the more you become aware of the real depth of your spiritual poverty before God. This is what the gift of Advent is to all of us, not just bishops, the gift before the Christmas present of Emmanuel.

It's all right to feel empty at Christmastime, to feel doubts pinch and old griefs re-open. It is all part of the process of God filling your need. But first we must become aware of that emptiness, in order to appreciate the height and the depth and the breadth of the love of God for each of you and me, in Christ Jesus, our Emmanuel.

The Baptist is right: the Lord *is* nigh. Rejoice, rejoice, for truly Emmanuel shall come to you.