

THE MYSTERY OF ADVENT

By CLIFFORD HOWELL

EVERY year in the world of nature the same seasons come round – spring, summer, autumn and winter – and the same things happen over and over again. And every year in what we might call the world of supernature – the world of grace – the same seasons come round. We have Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, when likewise the same things happen over and over again. And in each case the underlying purpose is the same – to develop and to strengthen life.

A tree, as the result of each natural year, grows in stature and its natural life becomes stronger. And we Christians, as the result of each liturgical year, should likewise grow in stature and our spiritual life should become stronger. But if we let the seasons of the Church's year go by without taking any part in them, we profit by them no more than a tree would do if somehow it could contrive to remain inert during the natural seasons. Activity corresponding with the season is absolutely necessary if there is to be any growth, strengthening or maturing.

It should be our object, therefore, to enter into Advent as fully as possible, to make its spirit and its outlook our own, to impress its meaning on our memory, to savour it with our understanding and to embrace it with our wills. It is a season of extreme beauty and great appeal, for there is about it an atmosphere unparalleled by any other of the Church's seasons; it is an astonishing blend of cheerfulness with sadness, of hope with fear, of longing with joy in possession. And this comes from the relationship of its mystery – its underlying reality – with that of the central mystery of the Christian faith, the paschal mystery.

This consists in a fact, a historic fact, that Christ, the second Adam, undid the harm suffered by the human race as the result of the first Adam's sin. Man had been handed over to the slavery of Satan, had become the prey of death, and was debarred from eternal life. But the Son of God became the 'Son of Man', took upon himself man's sad condition, and then utterly transformed it by passing over from death to life. He conquered death, not by evading it but by embracing it, going right through it, and destroying its hold on man.

*Mors et vita duello conflixere mirando,
Dux vitae mortuus regnat vivus.*¹

That is the essence of our redemption. 'Christ has risen from the dead, the first fruits of all those who have fallen asleep; a man had brought us death, and a man should bring us resurrection from the dead. Just as all have died with Adam, so with Christ all will be brought to life.'²

But this victory of Christ divides time into two parts, for it took place neither at the beginning nor at the end of time. It was an event for which a long preparation was needed. God intervened in man's affairs, forming for himself a chosen people, to whom he revealed his promise of the coming Saviour. An essential element in their religion was therefore to long for and believe in 'him who was to come'.

At last he came, won his victory, and thereby formed for himself a new chosen people to whom he revealed that in them his redemption was to be worked out and applied till the end of time; then he would come again in majesty, and would transform them as he had transformed himself, conferring on them the immortal life and the glory which he had won for them. It was likewise therefore an essential element in their religion that they should long for and believe in 'him who was to come'.

Thus each part of human history leads up to an 'advent', a 'coming' of the Son of God. And we, who live in the second part, are concerned with both. We look back to his first coming when he redeemed us; we look forward to his second coming when that redemption will have its full effect.

The early Church was vividly conscious of both these aspects. She rejoiced in the victory of Christ, keeping its memory alive by doing, every week, that which he said was to be done in memory of himself. Every eighth day she celebrated the Eucharist, memorial of her Lord's death, resurrection and ascension, and pledge of her own glorification when he should come again. Every Sunday was a paschal feast. For nearly two centuries the Church kept but this one feast, the paschal feast, which she celebrated every week. But after a while, and in the place where Christ had won his victory

¹ Death and Life clashed in mysterious strife;
Life's Captain, dead, now lives and reigns instead.

² 1 Cor 15, 20-22.

(in Jerusalem), a special importance was given to that Sunday which was the anniversary of the event. Thus arose the feast of Easter. Gradually its content was analysed into its historical elements and a celebration was arranged for each. Easter grew into Holy Week, acquired a festive season to follow and a preparatory season to precede the main feast, and by the fourth century the whole Catholic world was acting thus.

But the analysis of Christ's redemptive work into its historical constituents had a further effect. At Easter the Church was celebrating her Saviour's breaking out from the condition of enslaved mankind into the state of immortal glory. But he could break out from this condition only because he had previously entered it. And so, during the course of the fourth century, we find the Church beginning to celebrate the coming – the advent – of God's Son into the world. In Rome this was thought of as his birth among men; in Egypt and Arabia it was regarded as his visit to men. The dates, chosen in reaction to local forms of sun-worship, were 25th December in Rome and 6th January in Egypt. The Roman feast was Christmas and the Egyptian feast was Epiphany.

In due course east and west communicated their feasts to each other, so that both were kept in both regions. Indeed, they were viewed from somewhat different angles and took on different shades of meaning – the west tending to concentrate on events while the east preferred abstract ideas. But fundamentally both feasts have the same content – they are concerned with the first coming of Christ into this world. And as time went on, both developed a festive season to follow and a preparatory season to precede the main festival, as had happened with Easter. This, of course, is an extremely summary and simplified account of what happened, but it may suffice to show how the liturgical year is built up of the Easter cycle and the Christmas cycle, and that the latter grew out of the former. The greatest feast of the year is, and will ever remain, the paschal feast. For therein is enshrined the central mystery of Christ.

When Christmas acquired a preparatory season, it began somewhat tentatively as the analogue of Lent. We come across something of the kind first of all in Gaul during the fifth century, but it was an ascetical rather than a liturgical preparation; that is, there were no special readings or prayers or Mass formulae assigned to it. It was in Rome, and about a century later, that these features appeared in the form of lessons and collects *De Adventu Domini*. The Ember Days occurring shortly before Christmas occupied

themselves with the theme of Christ's first Coming. But in the divine Office and some Sunday Masses which took shape a little later, the processional chants, lessons, responsories, antiphons and other constituents of the liturgy show that the Church was thinking just as much – perhaps even more – of Christ's second coming at the end of time. The Advent liturgy, after local variations both in length and in content, assumed its present form in all essentials by the end of the eighth century. In it we find a compilation of wondrous charm in which remarkably apt passages of Scripture abound. And their interest and beauty are found largely in their polyvalence: in many cases they can be interpreted as applying to the coming of Christ in any of three ways.

For we can, in fact, distinguish three advents or comings of Christ, all of which the Church proposes for our consideration during this season. One is past, one is present and one is to come; because of their differing circumstances they have been well named Christ's 'Coming in History', his 'Coming in Mystery' and his 'Coming in Majesty'. They can be traced out with varying degrees of clarity and emphasis throughout the whole of the Advent liturgy. But as the texts of the missal are within reach of everybody, while those of the divine Office are easily available only to priests, we will refer here chiefly to the Masses of the season.

In the Mass of the First Sunday in Advent there is no explicit mention of Christ's Coming in History, that is, of his birth in the stable at Bethlehem. It might seem that this Mass is in no way intended to prepare us for Christmas. Yet that is hasty conclusion. Christ's Coming in History is, in fact, proposed to our *memory* by the choice, as 'stational church', of St. Mary Major's where the crib is kept!

Christ's Coming in Majesty carried the main emphasis. It is proposed to our *understanding* by the account, in the Gospel, of the end of time when the Son of Man will come 'in a cloud, with his full power and majesty'.

And what of the Coming in Mystery? This is the name sometimes given to a coming of Christ quite different in nature from the other two comings; it is not an event in history, yet must occur for each and every one of us if those events are to profit us. It is the coming of Christ into our hearts by his grace, which is imparted to us by the 'Christian mysteries' of the Mass, the sacraments and celebration of the liturgical year. It is for us the present reality of the Advent season – for the Coming in History is past and the Coming

in Majesty lies in the future. Here and now the coming which concerns us is Christ's Coming in Mystery. It is, on this first Sunday, proposed to our *will* by the exhortation of the Epistle to 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ'.

As already remarked, it is the Coming in Majesty which, this week, stands in the foreground. When it happens, it will be the most important and world-shaking event in human history – that to which all other events, even the Incarnation and the Redemption, are directed as towards a climax. 'World-shaking' is the right phrase to use of it, for 'the powers of heaven shall be moved' and men shall 'wither away for fear and expectation of what shall come upon the whole world'.

What is it going to mean for us? The Church wants us to think and pray about it most earnestly, and to recognize that our fate *then* will depend on the earnestness and sincerity wherewith we collaborate *now* with Christ as he comes to us in mystery. To make room in our hearts for the grace which he offers us, we must 'abandon the ways of darkness and put on the armour of light'. We must 'pass our time honourably, as by the light of day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries'.

To lead good and virtuous lives we must become rich in the grace of God. But it is those who 'hunger and thirst after justice' who shall 'have their fill'. It is the hungry whom God fills with good things. We must fervently want Christ to come into our hearts by his grace. The greater our desire for his Coming, the more abundantly shall we be filled with his grace.

And so the Church sets herself to stimulate our desire by reminding us of the intense yearning of good people in Old Testament times for the first coming of our Lord: his Coming in History. As Advent goes on, this theme becomes ever more and more prominent till it reaches its climax in the feast of Christmas itself; while the theme of the Coming in Majesty recedes into the background. Yet it does not quite disappear – for the Epistle of the third (original) Christmas Mass has for its theme the majesty of Christ, while that of the Gospel is his Godhead. And the Epiphany Mass opens with Malachy's prophecy about the coming of the Lord and Ruler, armed with royal power and dominion.

But all the while the purpose of our remembering Christ's Coming in History and of our understanding his Coming in Majesty is that we may effectively will his Coming in Mystery and thus

receive abundant grace here and now in our hearts.

On the Second Sunday in Advent we find that the emphasis is on the Coming in Mystery—for there is much insistence (Introit, Gradual, Communion) on the idea that our Lord is coming to Sion and that the people of Sion are to rejoice and to prepare. These passages are not now applicable to the ancient Jewish capital which was utterly destroyed in fulfilment of the prophecy quoted in the Mass a fortnight before. It is another Jerusalem into which he is now to come – and again the choice of the station church shows us which it is. For on this Sunday the station is at ‘Holy Cross in Jerusalem’ – a material church built in Rome, the heart of that immaterial Church which Christ founded and which is his Bride.

St. John, describing his apocalyptic vision, wrote: ‘An angel came and spoke to me . . . Come with me, he said, and I will shew thee that bride, whose bridegroom is the Lamb . . . and he showed me the Holy City Jerusalem, as it came down, sent by God, from Heaven.’¹ And so it would be quite reasonable to interpret the references to Sion in terms of Christ’s Coming in Majesty, since it is at this Second Coming that he is glorified in his nuptial union with the Church. It is then, too, that the Church will be glorified, for here below none of her glory has yet been bestowed. Only in heaven can she celebrate the ‘nuptials of the Lamb’. And yet it seems more apt to interpret Sion here as the Church here on earth, for it is she who celebrates the Christian mysteries. But we are the Church on earth, we are the grace-filled Body of Christ; it is into our hearts that he comes by his grace. He comes as healer and teacher and priest; for all these purposes he comes now to the Church in his mysteries just as he formerly came to the Jews in History.

That he should heal human ills was one of the signs whereby he could be recognized as Messiah. The Gospel of this Second Sunday reminds us of that. When St. John the Baptist sent his disciples to make enquiries, our Lord drew attention to this very credential. ‘Go and tell John what your own eyes and ears have witnessed; how the blind see and the lame walk and the lepers are made clean and the deaf hear and how the dead are raised to life’. The same things happen now on the spiritual level by his Coming in Mystery. The spiritually blind can be illuminated and the spiritually deaf are enabled to hear the Word of God through Baptism; the spiritually lame who do but limp along the road to heaven can

¹ Apoc 21, 9.

be cured and strengthened by the Eucharist. The spiritually dead are awakened, in Confession, to the life of grace. Christ is our healer.

He is also our teacher. To those same enquirers he said: 'The poor have the Gospel preached to them'. He still teaches through his infallible Church. He comes to us as teacher also at Mass, where his doctrines are laid before us in the Epistles and Gospels and expounded in the sermon. 'The Lord shall make heard the glory of his voice', says the Introit; this comes true at every Mass in the Scripture readings and whenever the 'Word of God' is preached in the sermon.

When he first came in History, he came as priest, for his purpose was to offer sacrifice on Calvary. And it is as priest that he now comes in mystery, for he is the chief offerer in every Mass.

In his Mysteries, therefore, Christ comes to us as healer and teacher and priest. We shall receive the more fully of his graces in proportion as we are ready for his coming. St. Paul, in the Epistle, tells us what to do. If only we carry out his advice we may be confident that 'God the author of our hope will fill us all with joy and peace', especially at the holy season for which Advent is a preparation, the time when we rejoice in his Coming in History.

And we are to have this joy even before we come to the feast. On the third Sunday we find rose-coloured vestments, flowers on the altar, the organ playing, and a Mass beginning with St. Paul's lovely greeting: 'Joy to you in the Lord at all times; once again I wish you joy!' What is the special cause of joy? It is the message which the Church gives us through the mouth of St. Paul: 'The Lord is near'. But in the Gospel, through the mouth of St. John the Baptist, she adds: 'He is here now, he is standing in the midst of you'.

Is not this rather extraordinary? For the purpose of telling us that the Lord is near is surely to raise our desire for him to a fever-pitch. We are to yearn for him with all our hearts. And yet, if he is already here in the midst of us as the source of our joy, how can we be in a fever of expectation? Is there not a contradiction in saying that Christ is near (that is, still to come) and adding that he is in the midst of us (that is, already arrived)?

For anyone but Christ this would be a contradiction; and for his Comings in History and in Majesty these two statements could not be simultaneously true. But for his Coming in Mystery both statements are verified. That is the truth which the Church tries to

impress on us on this Third Sunday in Advent. For Christ is already with us by his grace; 'I am the vine and you are the branches . . . you have only to live on in me and I will live on in you!'¹ This abiding presence of Christ in the Christian is our comfort and our strength. And yet Christ is also *to come*, for our life of grace should be ever increasing and ever growing stronger. We are never so filled with grace that we can no more receive of *his* fullness. Always there is more to come if we are sufficiently desirous of his further coming.

This blend of joy-in-possession with longing-for-the-yet-to-come is one of the most characteristic paradoxes of the true Christian attitude. Our supernatural life of grace is the beginning of our eternal life. Grace is the pledge of glory: but it is not yet glory. We rejoice in grace now: yet we aspire to glory which is to come. We are blessed with God's light now: yet we see but as through a glass darkly, and long to see him face to face.

We are 'dying men', wrote St. Paul, and yet 'see, we live . . . sad men who rejoice continually; beggars who bring riches to many; disinherited, yet the world is ours'.² So also we rejoice in possessing Christ here and now – and yet we are filled with yearning that he may come. 'Exert, Lord, thy sovereign strength for our salvation, and come!' The Collect contains this wanting-yet-having thought, this Advent-Christmas thought, with admirable succinctness: 'By the grace of thy coming, light up the darkness of our minds'.

The Mass of the Fourth Sunday in Advent lacks unity, for it was assembled, at a comparatively late date, from materials already used in the Ember Week just gone by. But the emphasis, as we would expect on a day so near to the great feast, is on the Coming of Christ in History. We find many echoes of the Old Testament desire for his first coming. The Introit is the poetic appeal of the Advent prophet Isaias: 'Send down dew from above, you heavens, and let the skies pour down upon us the rain we long for, him, the Just One.' The psalmist in the Alleluia-versicle calls out: 'Come, Lord, do not linger; loosen the fetters of thy people, Israel'.

Our minds are directed ever more vividly to the Coming in History by the Gospel wherein that precise historian St. Luke specifies with exactness the 'fifteenth year of the emperor Tiberius's reign, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, when Herod was prince of Galilee . . .' All this solemn preamble, filled with names

¹ Jn 15, 3.

² 2 Cor 6, 8.

we know, brings us out of the Old Testament memories into the familiarity and gladness of the New Testament times of 'him who is to come'. Even his Mother comes into this Mass, for the Offertory verse consists of the salutations of the Angel and of St. Elisabeth just before he was born. And the explanation and cause of all this crescendo of anticipation is given explicitly in the words of the Communion verse: 'Behold, a virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and he shall be called Emmanuel'.

Of the Coming of Christ in Majesty there is hardly a trace in this Mass, unless we interpret as such the Postcommunion which prays that 'with each partaking of this sacrament we may be led nearer to salvation'. For salvation is complete, of course, only with Christ's second coming.

And so Advent leads us on through desire to peace and contentment at Christmastide, to joy in Christ's Coming in History which we celebrate now in Mystery. But if we see things aright, our gaze will not rest there. We shall realize that the Babe whom we contemplate in his crib is there now only in our imagination. He *was* there two thousand years ago beyond all doubt. But now he is the Lord of glory; he is living and reigning for ever and ever, the 'radiance of his Father's splendour and the full expression of his being', as the Epistle of the third Mass on Christmas day reminds us.

This same thought of glory and splendour comes to the fore even more insistently in the feast of the Epiphany which follows soon after Christmas. It is true that for some centuries past the Epiphany has been understood – at least by the ordinary run of the faithful – as celebrating the visit of the three Wise Men to the Infant in the crib; and the title of the feast, which means 'manifestation', has been explained as the 'manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles' as represented by these three good men. But in fact the feast has a much deeper meaning than that.

It is not just a manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, but the manifestation of God to the world in Jesus Christ. And this was originally conceived by the Church as taking place not only through the visit of the Magi, but also through the baptism of our Lord and through his first miracle at Cana. Indeed at one period the Transfiguration was also included in the same idea. But gradually the content of the feast settled down to what is expressed in the *Benedictus* at Lauds: 'Today the Church is united with her heavenly spouse; for in the Jordan Christ washed away her stains, the Magi hasten with gifts to the royal wedding feast, and the guests are

made joyful by the water turned into wine, alleluia.’

But even to this there is a background. The word ‘epiphany’ was used in the east for a particular feature of civil life, namely, the official visit made by a ruler to some city within his territory. This was always a festive occasion, calling for the greatest pomp and ceremony. It involved, among other events, the appearance of the ruler at a great public banquet; it was thus that he showed or ‘manifested’ himself to his people.

Thus the word ‘epiphany’ is eminently suitable for the appearance of the Son of God among men. For here we have the greatest of all kings appearing in the holy city of his Church; and we who are its citizens give him a triumphant welcome in the banquet which is the Eucharist.

Another overtone of the word comes from eastern marriage customs. Weddings were – and still are – tremendous affairs in the east, involving ‘appearances’ of the bridegroom and bride at banquets prolonged sometimes for several days in succession. Orientals take such delight in these marriage festivities that they are wont to picture the joys of heaven in terms of a wedding feast. Our Lord showed that he knew well how to appeal to the popular mind when he said: ‘here is an image of the kingdom of heaven: there was once a king who held a marriage feast for his son . . .’ We find nuptial imagery occurring again and again in the Bible, both in the Old Testament and in the New. The prophets spoke of God’s love for his people in terms of a man’s love for his spouse, and St. Paul used the same figure of speech when describing the love of Christ for his Church. It is not surprising, therefore, to find the metaphor used in the liturgy of the Epiphany: *Hodie caelesti sponso juncta est ecclesia*.¹

The two ideas of the visit of a king to his city and the feast which celebrates a wedding combine very easily, since both are joyful public occasions calling for the maximum of splendour and magnificence. The Church applies both to Christ who is viewed as coming to his Church not only as king but also as bridegroom. Our Lord referred to himself implicitly as king on several occasions, and acknowledged the title in answer to Pilate’s question. He also acknowledged himself as bridegroom in answer to the question about fasting put to him by the disciples of St. John the Baptist who had referred to him as bridegroom. And so the liturgy represents

¹ ‘Today the Church is united to the heavenly bridegroom’.

Christ as coming into this world as a bridegroom who woos his church by redeeming her and celebrates his nuptials in the eucharistic banquet. And this, in turn, is both a symbol and a presage of the everlasting union between Christ and his Church described in the Apocalypse as the Wedding Feast of the Lamb.

The wedding theme explains also the inclusion into the content of this feast of the Marriage at Cana. This ranks as an epiphany because, by changing water into wine, Christ 'manifested himself to these disciples', as the evangelist remarks. And obviously it was also a prefiguration of the eucharistic banquet wherein takes place an even more wonderful change. It links up, too, with the idea of the Baptism in the Jordan; for there Christ changed water in yet another way, raising it from the status of a mere natural element to that of a divine instrument for the generation of spiritual life. According to the Fathers it was the descent of our Lord into the Jordan which sanctified for all time the waters of Christian baptism. And clearly the occasion was also an epiphany: a very striking manifestation of God in his Trinity of Persons. For the Father's voice testified to the Son upon whom descended the Holy Spirit.

The greatest of all manifestations of God to man lies still in the future: it will be the Second Coming of Christ, the Parousia. Admittedly there is no explicit reference to it in the liturgy of the Epiphany; but the great king who comes in power and glory is mentioned so often in the Masses and offices of the season that our minds are inevitably directed towards that most important of all epiphanies. For example, the Introit for the feast is the prophetic cry of Malachy: 'See, he comes, our Lord and Ruler, armed with royal power and dominion'. That of the following Sunday is apocalyptic: 'I saw a man sitting on a high throne worshipped by a throng of angels'. Neither of these passages was verified at the visit of the Magi, at the Baptism in the Jordan or at the Wedding Feast of Cana. Only at the Parousia will they, and similar passages from the season's liturgy, come true.

Rightly, then, we may discern the Coming of Christ in Majesty as a theme implicit in the Epiphany, just as we found it explicitly in Advent. For it will be the culmination of all our Saviour's work, the apotheosis of the Church, and the occasion which realizes beyond all others the utmost fullness of meaning to be found in both words 'Epiphany' and 'Advent'.