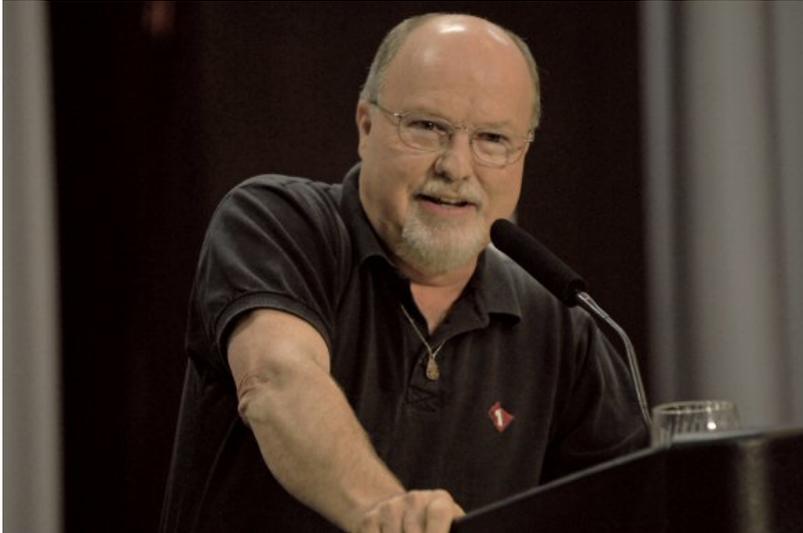


Preparing for Christmas



"Advent is not about a sentimental waiting for the Baby Jesus."

Some years ago I gave a conference on "Preparing for Christmas" that St. Anthony Messenger Press (now Franciscan Media) was kind enough to publish in recorded form. It has continued to sell well for many years, and so they asked me if I would work with them to publish a print version. "Preparing for Christmas: Daily Meditations for Advent" is the result.

In the original lectures I tried to invite people beyond a merely sentimental understanding of Christmas as "waiting for the baby Jesus" to an adult and social appreciation of the message of the Incarnation of God in Christ. We Franciscans have always believed that the Incarnation was already the Redemption, because in Jesus' birth God was already saying that it was good to be human, and God was on our side.

At the original conference, I felt that the need on this earth for adult Christianity and the actual message of Jesus was so urgent that we could not allow this great feast of Christmas, and its preparation in Advent, to be watered down in any way. Twenty years later, I feel this is even more true. Jesus identified his own message with what he called the coming of the "reign of God" or the "kingdom of God," whereas we had often settled for the sweet coming of a baby who asked little of us in terms of surrender, encounter, mutuality, or any studying of the Scriptures or the actual teaching of Jesus. Sentimentality, defined as trumped-up emotions, can be an avoiding of and substitute for an actual relationship, as we see in our human relationships, too.

We Catholics must admit that there is a constant temptation among us to avoid the lectionary and the Word of God for private and pious devotions that usually have little power to actually change us or call our ego assumptions into question. The Word of God, however, confronts, converts and consoles us --

in that order. The suffering, injustice and devastation on this planet are too great now to settle for any infantile Jesus. Actually, that has always been true.

"Jesus is Lord!" of all creation! This was the rallying cry of the early church (Philippians 2:11; Acts 2:36; Romans 1:4, etc.). It is to this adult and cosmic Christ that we are saying, "Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelations 22:20), which are the final words of the Bible. This makes our entire lives, and the life of the church, one huge "advent." Remember, Advent is always -- until the end of days.

"Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Matthew 24:42).

"Come Lord Jesus," the Advent mantra, means that all of Christian history has to live out a kind of deliberate emptiness, a kind of chosen non-fulfillment. Perfect fullness is always to come, and we do not need to demand it now. This keeps the field of life wide open and especially open to grace and to a future created by God rather than ourselves. This is exactly what it means to be "awake," as the Gospel urges us! We can also use other a words for Advent: aware, alive, attentive, alert, awake, are all appropriate! Advent is, above else, a call to full consciousness and a forewarning about the high price of consciousness.

When we demand satisfaction of one another, when we demand any completion to history on our terms, when we demand that our anxiety or any dissatisfaction be taken away, saying as it were, "Why weren't you this for me? Why didn't life do that for me?" we are refusing to say, "Come, Lord Jesus." We are refusing to hold out for the full picture that is always given to us by God.

"Come, Lord Jesus" is a leap into the kind of freedom and surrender that is rightly called the virtue of hope. The theological virtue of hope is the patient and trustful willingness to live without closure, without resolution, and still be content and even happy because our Satisfaction is now at another level, and our Source is beyond ourselves. We are able to trust that he will come again, just as Jesus has come in our past, into our private dilemmas and into our suffering world. Our Christian past then becomes our Christian prologue, and "Come, Lord Jesus" is not a cry of desperation but an assured shout of cosmic hope.

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