

PREPARING THE HOUSE  
A Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent, 2012  
On the Text: Propers for the Day  
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

Advent is a wonderful season of the Church year, a penitential season that is also joyous as we anticipate the joy of Christmas. We look forward to decorating our houses and cities, of visiting and having visits with friends and family, of beautiful music in church; but we often miss the meaning of this season in the here and now as we anticipate the joy of Christmas. There are some things we need to do to get ready, not just for Christmas, or even for the entire year. Advent is here to help us get ready for the rest of our lives. Let me tell you a parable.

Old friends and neighbors know how you live. If one of them is going to come over for a cup of coffee, you may not do much to tidy up. You know they understand the local conditions and how they affect how the inside of your house may look. If you live in the dry and dusty southwest, you may have a problem with dust in your house, especially if there is a dirt road near your house. If you live someplace where snow covers the ground for as much half of the year, such as we do here in Colorado, you are familiar with the fact that we have five seasons instead of just four, that fifth season is the one that comes between winter and spring sometime between late March and early May when the snow cover melts. It is called Mud season. Even if you don't have dogs, it is very hard to keep the floors clean during Mud season. Here many of us are afflicted with all three of these problems, that is if you have dogs and consider them to be a problem.

Whether you have any of these problems or not, now lets add another problem into the mix. After many years of being apart, an old friend is coming to visit you, a friend whom you deeply respect and love, but was someone who always had a reputation as something of a perfectionist. What do you do? How do you prepare for this visit? Even if your house always looks ready for

the photographers from Better Homes and Garden to show up and take pictures for the next issue, isn't it the case that most people, even those in the Better Homes & Gardens situation, would still take some extra effort to make sure everything would be just right just before this honored guest arrived. This was the sort of thing that troops in the Army would have to do just before the Post General was going to come for a Regimental Inspection, and even more so when there was going to be an inspection by the Inspector General of the Army, the IG. Shouldn't we do something similar when that guest will be Jesus Christ, who just happens to be the creator of the universe and Lord of Lords, King of Kings, and the Judge of all mankind?

What if it turns out that this honored guest doesn't really care how your house looks, that He only cares about the state of your heart and soul and whether you truly love Him? Suppose you knew this. If you knew when He was coming, and knew that he really meant it when He said He would separate the sheep from the goats, that he had said that there will be many who will say they have loved Him and worked in His Name, but to whom He will say: **Matthew 7:23 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'**, what would you do? If you knew that who was coming was Jesus and that He really cared about the state of your house, you would probably try to make a barracks that is ready for an IG inspection look like a pigsty in comparison to your house. There are two problems here: The first problem is that not only is He not really interested in the state of the physical house (remember something He said once about "white-washed tombs (Matthew 23:27)"?). The second problem is that He has told us that no one except the Father knows when He is coming (Matt. 24:36).

It is one of the purposes of Advent to remind us of this. If we don't know when the Inspector, the Judge, is coming, that ought to tell us that the house needs to ready for inspection

at all times. This is one of the purposes of Advent – to remind us of this. We'll come back to this almost unthinkable idea in a few minutes. Let's look at something that is easier to comprehend.

For anyone who does not know this, an *Advent* is a coming, a coming toward, or an arrival. The Advent season of the church is generally thought to have two purposes: First to prepare us spiritually for our celebration of Christmas, the Birth of Christ, which is considered to be His First Coming, and then Secondly, to remind us and help us to prepare for His Second coming; or maybe it is the other way around.

Because of all the secular emphasis on gift-giving and supporting the economy at Christmas time, it might seem that the most important function of the Advent season is to prepare us for Christmas as the celebration of the birth of Jesus. In the past that is what it has seemed to be – a preparation for Christmas. That is certainly important, but is it the most important? Somehow, I don't think so.

It is very hard to assess the importance of the events of what is called “redemptive history”, which is the history of God's and man's mutual interactions in the history of God's making for Himself a people who are made in His own image. The problem with such people is that they have enough free will that they can reject God's offers, and they can refuse to keep His commandments. When we look at redemptive history, we see that God began with Adam and Eve, and they flunked the test. Next, all of mankind flunked except Noah and his family. Then God started with another man, Abraham, and chose a people from Abraham's grandson, Jacob, whom God later renamed Israel. Israel's 12 children and their offspring had a checkered history up until the birth of Christ, which was certainly far more important than most of what went before that blessed event. Jesus' birth would not have the importance it has unless there were some other events in His life that could some-how overshadow it, namely, His Crucifixion,

Death, and Resurrection; and those three events really need to be looked at a single event. It was in those three days that He opened the Kingdom of heaven to all believers. His Ascension sealed the truth of all that went before it – that He was in truth the Son of God Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, Who is in fact, God.

We have His words recorded from before the Crucifixion and those of an angel recorded at the Ascension that he will come again. The only event of any real significance that has happened since the Ascension was the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Since that time, nothing of any significance has happened that might somehow change what we must do to be saved. We seem to be in a period when God is silent, just as He was during the 400 years between the Prophet Malachi and the birth of Jesus.

However, there are some other comings of Christ that we also need to take a look at: Advents that are not usually thought about or discussed as Advents, and which are not usually thought of as being tied to the Advent season. There are those appearances of “an angel of the Lord”, or of “the Lord” Himself in the OT, appearances that are called *theophanies*, appearances of God. One such was when the Lord appeared to Abraham with two angels as described in all of Genesis 18, in verses 1 through 33. We do not learn that two of them were angels until verse 1 of Chapter 19 where we learn they are the two angels who went to Sodom. Was this a pre-Incarnation appearance of Jesus? Many scholars think so.

There other Advents as well. Consider what Jesus said in Matthew 18:20 **20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. "** Any time we gather in this church to worship God and His Son, Jesus Christ, He is here among us. When there are just two of you at the table and someone asks the blessing in the Name of the Lord, He is there. What's more, He is here even more so in His mysterious presence in the Holy Eucharist. These

are true Advents. Are you made uneasy that God might be that close to you all through your life? It doesn't matter if that makes you uneasy or not; He is there. Both Francis Schaeffer and D. A. Carson gave books they wrote the title: *The God Who is There*; and that is what God is: the God Who is There,... Here, There, and Everywhere, even though he is not often seen in what appears to be human flesh. As far as we know, as far as Scripture tells us, God has not made an appearance in human form since the Ascension. However, that does not deny the spiritual Advents I spoke of a minute ago. At those times, and many others, God comes to us; and when He does, that is an Advent. To come to us in those ways, God does not have to go far, because He is already here. God's knowledge of us and what we do far transcends that Christmas song, "Santa Claus is coming to Town", says about Santa Claus, where it says, "He knows when you are sleeping; He knows when you're awake; He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake." As St. Luke tells us about Jesus in one of His encounters with the scribes and the Pharisees in Luke 6:7-8 [7 And the scribes and the Pharisees watched him, to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might find a reason to accuse him. 8 But he knew their thoughts, and he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come and stand here." And he rose and stood there.](#)

Jesus Christ knows everything there is to know about each of us. If He did not, He could not judge us in righteousness and truth, and with mercy.

When Jesus comes down to us at the final Advent, He will come unexpectedly. We shall have no warning. If we had warning, He would expect to see a flurry of activity in an attempt by each of us to put our spiritual houses in order. What we do know is that no person's spiritual house is ever ready for Jesus' inspection and judgement, not if He judged us without regard to Grace and justification. Justification is that get-out-of-jail-free card a person is given "by grace

through faith” by which we are accounted sinless because Jesus took all our sins on Himself when He was on the Cross. Those who believe in Him shall stand before Him wearing the cloak of His righteousness and will be judged “Not Guilty”; and they will receive some reward. We have no idea what that reward might be.

Jesus speaks of rewards at least 16 times in the Gospels indicating that not every one will receive the same reward. In Matthew 16:27, He says, **27 “For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.”** So, Justification and Salvation are based on Faith, but one’s reward is based on works. That means that you can’t just lay back and expect to receive spiritual goodies from God just because you say, “I believe” St Paul had that sort of problem with some of the people in the church he founded in Thessalonica; and St. James tells us in his letter, in 2:14-26, that if someone has faith it will be shown in his works, which is the same as saying that if someone does not have good works, he does not have faith. James in 2:26 says it this way: **faith apart from works is dead.**

For the church, today is New Year’s Day. This is a good time to make some resolutions and to begin to put our spiritual houses in better order, to put on the armor of light so that we can see the dust and dirt in the corners and under the rugs, now in the time of this mortal life, which is the only chance we have to do it. As the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews put it in Hebrews 9:27-28 **27 And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, 28 so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.**

With repentance and the broom of prayer and washings with the Blood of the Lamb, we can make our spiritual houses a little cleaner each day, so we shall be ready for all the Advents of Jesus.

AMEN!

Each year at Advent I read to you a paragraph about the Eucharist and Advent that was written by the English theologian and Priest, Austin Farrer. Here it is again.

“Advent is a coming, not our coming to God, but his to us. We cannot come to Him; He is beyond our reach; but He can come to us; for we are not beneath His mercy. Even in another life, as St. John sees it in his vision, we do not rise to God; but he descends to us, and dwells humanly among human creatures, in the glorious man, Jesus Christ. And that will be His last coming; so we shall be His people, and he everlastingly will be our God, our God-with-us, our Emmanuel. He *will* so come, but he is come already; He comes always: in our fellow-Christian (even in a child, says Christ), in His Word, invisibly in our souls, more visibly in this sacrament. Opening ourselves to Him, we call Him in; Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; O come, Emmanuel.”