

## THANKSGIVING AND ADVENT

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent, 2010-2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day

By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

Happy New Year! The First Sunday in Advent is the first day of Advent, which makes today the first day of a new Christian year. For trivia buffs, you need to know that this year Advent is almost as long as Advent can be. This year Christmas is on a Saturday. The only way Advent can be longer is when Christmas is on a Sunday; then Advent begins on November 27<sup>th</sup>, because there are always four Sundays in Advent – four Sundays *before* Christmas.

The calendar gave us another gift this year with Thanksgiving Day coming only three days before the beginning of Advent. I regret I was not here to celebrate Thanksgiving with you because Thanksgiving is one of the only two National Holidays the Reformed episcopal Church celebrates; the other one is Independence Day. This nearness of Thanksgiving Day to The First Sunday in Advent is not rare; It happens about five-sevenths of the time. However, in those two instances when November has five Thursdays, Thanksgiving can be ten days away from the beginning of Advent.. You may call it an accident of the calendar, but perhaps it is Providence that Thanksgiving is so often near to the beginning of Advent.

Is there a reason we should give thanks for the Advent season, for the idea of having an Advent season? Is it perhaps because that on Thanksgiving Day, we focus on and give thanks for all the good things that happened to us in the past year, and last year's Advent season is so far away – now a year ago – that we have forgotten it? Perhaps because, the word, Advent, does not occur in the KJV, or the NIV, or the ESV versions of Bible. Well, the words, Trinity, and Christmas and Easter can't be found in them either.

But there are things that can be found in the Bible that give many of us comfort and strength – spiritual support. Many of us latch on to certain verses of the Bible and carry them with us as beacons of light to guide us on the path God wants us to walk on, as in verse 105 of Psalm 119:105 [Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path](#). I have another one I hold onto that St. Paul gave us in his first epistle to the Thessalonians. The other night when I was looking for resources about Advent, I came across a list of Bible readings for Advent, and was happy to see that not only was the passage that contains this verse listed, but that almost the entire book of Thessalonians is covered, in short pieces. The verse I am thinking of is First Thessalonians 5:18 [18 In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you](#). The second part of this: [“for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.”](#) has to do not just with giving thanks, but with several other things St. Paul listed just before that that we should do, such as [“Rejoice always”](#) and [“Pray without ceasing.”](#) We are to do all those things that St. Paul listed in First Thessalonians 5.

In their commentary on the Epistles to the Thessalonians, William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker point out that believers should always be joyful at the redemptive work of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Gospels, that we should ceaselessly pray, and that in all circumstances –

even bad ones – we should give thanks. They say, “When a person prays without giving thanks, he has clipped the wings of prayer so that it cannot rise.”

The Holy Communion, of which we shall soon partake, is often called the Eucharist. Do you know why it is called that? In St. Luke’s Gospel, when he describes the Last Supper, at which Jesus instituted the Holy Communion of His Body and Blood, we read this: Luke 22:19 **19 And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.** He gave thanks. That seems rather ordinary until you realize or are told that the Greek word for *to give thanks* is *εὐχαριστέω*. The Eucharist is a Thanksgiving. Some call it the Great Thanksgiving because in the service we acknowledge and give thanks for Jesus Death and Resurrection which is the great and only sacrifice through which we could be saved, and for which we give great thanks. St. Paul says it this way in 1 Corinthians 11:26 **26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.** We proclaim the Lord’s death in this service today; and when we do that, we also bear witness to the Gospel, the good news of His resurrection. We give great thanks for that. It is really something for which we shall be eternally thankful.

Our formal and national Day of Thanksgiving is over, and much of the United States and some of the rest of the world has turned to a frenzy of commercialism. The season of Advent seems to have turned into a season of Buy, Buy, Buy and Sell, Sell, Sell. Even worse for many of us is that we wish that the floodgates of advertisements had been kept closed until after Thanksgiving Day. Advent, What’s that? Oh, the season of Buy, Buy, Buy and Sell, Sell, Sell.

We don’t get that idea from the Propers we heard today. The Collect for today tells us what the entire season of Advent is about. Look in your Prayer Books on page 90 at the Collect and at the rubric, the fine print, right under it. For some reason, this Collect must be prayed at every service during Advent. That reason is to remind us of what this season is about. We ask for grace, as we do in most every Collect, but this time to help us put **away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light**. This is quote from our Epistle lesson. In this, the darkest time of the year, we need light just to be able to do the ordinary things of life. There are also many dark temptations at this time of year, during the season of Buy, Buy, Buy and Sell, Sell, Sell, against which we need the armor of light, the armor for our souls that can come only from Jesus Christ, who said in John 8:12 **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."** We acknowledge that we need this armor “**now in the time of this mortal life.**” We certainly won’t need it once we pass on to God’s Kingdom. It is “**in the time of this mortal life that Jesus came to visit us in great humility**”; and we know that even in His humility, He was rejected by many, and by those in Power in Jerusalem, both Jews and Romans. The Collect does not need to mention His Crucifixion and Resurrection before it continues with: “**that in the last day, when He shall come again in glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead**”. Now this is something that almost did not need to be said because we already know it. We said we believe that just a few minutes ago when we said the Nicene Creed. But look at the grammar of that. The clause, “**when He shall come again in glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead**” is a subordinate clause that sets a

condition, that when that happens something else will happen. That something else is that “we may rise to the life immortal”. The sense of this Prayer is that we need to have the armor of light **now**, so that on that last day, “we may rise to the life immortal”. And how shall all that come about? Through the work of Jesus Christ, “through Him Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen”.

You will hear this Collect prayed in every service between now and Christmas, whether in a Service of Holy Communion on Sunday or in Evening Prayer on Wednesday nights, even after the Collect for the Fourth Sunday in Advent. Why do we need this? To keep us from wandering off the path of what Advent is really all about, which is Preparation, preparation for our going forward in our religious life, in our life of faith.

God in His infinite power really does not need to prepare for anything, but man does. Football teams practice to prepare for games. So does any other athlete in any other sport. So must we all practice our faith to prepare for the things to come. God did not need to prepare Himself to bring Jesus Christ into the world as a baby in a manger, but he needed to prepare man for it. In our OT lesson, God, speaking through his prophet, Malachi, said Malachi in 3:1 “Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming.” In Isaiah 40:3, we read of God saying <sup>3</sup>A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”. but then in Matthew 3:1-3 we read of the fulfillment of that prophesy: **3:1 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 3 For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight."** That passage from Isaiah will be the OT lesson for the Fourth Sunday in Advent. The readings tell us of how the Jews were being prepared for the birth and life of Jesus. And we must prepare also.

We have to prepare for three things: The first seems simple, Christmas. We prepare ourselves spiritually to make a proper and holy celebration of the birth of Christ. This is not a matter of getting a tree or the church properly decorated. It’s the holy part that’s the hard part because Buy, Buy, Buy and Sell, Sell, Sell are not part of it. We often hear talk about the “meaning of Christmas”. Well, part of the meaning of Advent is preparation to participate in the True meaning of Christmas, to celebrate Jesus’ coming to us in great humility.

The second part is also pointed out in the Collect: to prepare for Jesus’ coming again in great glory to judge both the quick and the dead. Again, this is solely a spiritual thing, to use the old revival phrase, of getting right with God.

The third thing is really part of the second and that is to prepare ourselves spiritually to participate in the life of the church for all of the Christian year, to see that Advent leads to Christmas, and Christmas to the Epiphany, and from there to the Gesimas and Lent and the Glory of Easter, the Ascension, Pentecost, and then ordinary time when we learn more of the lessons Jesus taught before coming back to Advent again. The idea is that this is sort of an ascending spiral of spiritual growth and learning in which we go around the year as the earth goes around

the sun; and each year, when we get back to Advent, we are better and more mature as Christians than we were the year before at the same day of the year.

An Advent is a coming, either a part of a journey or the arrival. St. Paul in the Epistle lesson from Romans, is concerned with how we live on the journey. At first look, the Gospel lesson seems to be wrong for today, but the Gospel lesson speaks of two arrivals. Malachi prophesied in Malachi 3:1 **the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple;** In the Gospel lesson, we have the story of Jesus' triumphant arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and then we have His sudden arrival in the Temple with disastrous results for those whose businesses of Buy, Buy, Buy and Sell, Sell, Sell desecrated His House of Prayer.

An Advent can be a sudden arrival with disastrous consequences, and it can be a season beginning on a Sunday and going for three more Sundays and a few days in which a people are called to prepare for the celebration of the birth of God Incarnate. A preparation that is both joyful and penitent, in which we, in humility, await the celebration of His birth and at the same time realize that we also have to prepare for the day when He shall come again in great glory. Let us prepare for the Lord's Advents with Thanksgiving in Joyful and Penitent Anticipation.

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.”