

THE CONTEXT OF ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

Jews in the time of Christ looked forward to the coming of a Messiah, someone who would change their lives by defeating their Roman rulers and bringing in a time of peace and prosperity. The longing for a Messiah does not operate in us in the same way, but it does still operate. It operates in us as a longing for life to be different; not simply or superficially different, but essentially and fundamentally different in terms of how we feel and the way we live. This longing for life to be essentially, fundamentally different is the context that gives rise to the Christian seasons of Advent and Christmas, and the meaning of these seasons is found in the way they address that longing. In other words, when separated from this longing the seasons of Advent and Christmas cease to be religious. They may be enjoyable and meaningful, and be valid in that sense, but they are no longer connected to what they were intended to address.

Advent and Christmas are concerned with the beginning of the work God does to bring about fundamental and substantive change in the way we think, feel, see and act. The stories we read about the figure called the “Son of Man,” about John the Baptist, Mary, Joseph, the birth of Christ, the angels, shepherds and kings each depict an aspect of what is involved in change being brought to us. The four weeks of Advent describe experiences which make us ready to receive what we might best describe as an “enhancement” to the habitual way our minds work. This augmenting of our mind is what is celebrated at Christmas as the birth of Christ. Using 21st century concepts, the birth of Christ is the appearance in us of a mind that does not moralize on us, and which brings to us the experience of not being moralized on; that is, the experience of not being criticized and judged, evaluated and scrutinized for who we are and what we think, feel and do. This mind welcomes us, embraces us, appreciates us and seeks to comprehend us just as we are. Through this experience of our not being moralized on we begin to realize how much we moralize on ourselves and others. There is no judgment for our being this way; there is only the awareness of the moralistic way we relate to ourselves, the gradual dawning of its injurious consequences, and the appearance of sympathy for the impact on us of this way of relating. This different mind of Christ grows in us, and as it does so it shifts the way we look at ourselves, and changes what we see when we look at ourselves. The appearance of this mind and the resulting shift in our perception is what the birth of Christ refers to, and is the way we would experience the coming of the Messiah.

For most people the meaning of Advent and Christmas is found by reading the stories, singing carols about the stories, and enacting the traditions associated with the stories. Doing so induces nostalgic feelings in us, and it is easy to believe that the evoking of these feelings is the purpose of the seasons, even that these feelings are the meaning of these seasons. However, the purpose and the meaning of these seasons is something other than what we feel; it transcends our feelings. The meaning of these seasons is the appearance of this different mind and the shift in perception which is occurring in us, this different way of “seeing” which is coming alive in us. The purpose of the seasons is to highlight the appearance of this mind and the shift in our seeing and perceiving which it brings.