

The Sanctuary in Advent and Christmas

Advent and Christmas are both seasons of the Christian Liturgical Year or Church Year. Advent is the first season of the church year and is a season which concerns our being prepared for the birth of Christ. It is a time of our being made ready to receive, of our being brought to a place of waiting and expectation. Advent is celebrated on the four Sundays before Christmas Day. Christmas is the second season of the Church Year and focuses on the celebration of the birth of Christ. Christmas is a time of receiving a specific way of being held, one characterized by acceptance, compassion, understanding and welcome. The birth of Christ is the appearance in us of being held in this way. Christmas is twelve days long, beginning on December 25th and ending on January 6th, Epiphany Day. As is true of all of the seasons in the Church Year, the seasons of Advent and Christmas describe experiences that happen inside us. During these seasons the sanctuary is appointed in a way that corresponds to the experience the season is celebrating.

Advent focuses on those times in life when our familiar world comes apart in some way, when we are driven to hold it together at all costs, and then fail to do so. Different metaphors may be used to describe this experience: the loss of heart, emptiness, the loss of motivation. A longing arises in us for the heart to return and our life to go back to normal. This longing commonly takes the form of remorse and or regret for things being the way they are. This experience is best described by the word "penitent", which means "...feeling or expressing remorse for the ways one has missed the mark". Advent is a penitential season and the sanctuary is prepared in such a way as to hold and validate the different elements of the penitential experience.

The sanctuary is intentionally bare and less stimulating. Advent draws a person into a quiet, inward and reflective space. Busyness will likely be distracting, or maybe irrelevant, or even painful. There is a withered quality to much of what occurs in this season. One of the customary symbols of Advent which conveys this feeling space is an Advent Wreath made from "dead" pine cones or vines or straw. Fabrics used in Advent will be coarse and rough reflecting how this season feels.

Since Advent is a penitential season, and since purple is traditionally the penitential color, purple has historically been the color of Advent. The color expresses the mood of Advent, which is dark or somber yet also rich. Dark blue is a color that is being introduced as the color for Advent as a

way to distinguish it from the season of Lent, which is also a penitential season. Whichever color is used, it is important to keep in mind that Advent is a penitential season which revolves around "feeling remorse for the way one had missed the mark".

There are candles. Light always represents the presence of God. Historically, the candles of Advent are purple, although they can also be dark blue. For either color the symbolism remains the same--God is at work in the dark richness.

There is always some representation of the birth of Christ and of the promise that life will come through this penitential experience. Usually this is a white candle which is called the Christ Candle. Sometimes there is a crèche or nativity to represent the birth of Christ. A crèche may be present throughout Advent, or it may be introduced late in the season. Often there are evergreens which symbolize the continuation of vitality through bleak times.

We often want to make Christmas radically different from Advent. However, this is not an accurate portrayal of the experience of Christmas. Christmas is always related to Advent, to the experiences of the familiar world falling apart and the loss of heart. The birth of Christ comes into the middle of that experience and addresses it by teaching us to hold it differently, or to see it in a different light. If the birth of Christ is the coming to life in us of acceptance and welcome, it is to us as a person who has lost heart that the welcome and acceptance come. The relief of Christmas comes not from the restoration of heart but from the welcome and acceptance of us with that loss still being experienced. When we forget to link these two seasons, and when we stop maintaining that link, the season of Advent becomes a time without hope, and the season of Christmas becomes an affectation without substance.

Taking this into account, the season of Christmas has a different feel and a different color from Advent. The feeling is one of relief or welcome or acceptance which comes to us in the middle of remorse. The relief is not the absence of remorse but our not being to blame for the remorse, for the remorse not being our fault or a sign of our failure. Reflecting the birth of Christ and the shift in our feelings which it brings, the Christmas colors are white and gold and the sanctuary appointed more elaborately than in Advent. Figures from the Christmas narratives are common--angels, shepherds, stars, animals, Wise Men--and again, crèches or nativities to symbolize the Christmas stories and the birth of Christ. [Jim Robie, 11-30-09]