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The Meaning of Advent: Implications for Preaching

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If we confess that the Holy Spirit, at work in the church at all times and in all places, in some sense inspired the development of a liturgical calendar and a pericopal system for the expansion of the Mystery, the edification of the faithful, and the amplification of preaching possibilities, then we must also confess that the Spirit could effect changes in the meaning of the various feasts and liturgical seasons with the passage of time and with shifts in the expression of piety. The Holy Spirit did not retire in the fourth century any more than he did after the day of Pentecost. Just as theological integrity requires that we deal with the historical, objective meaning of Scripture before personally and subjectively receiving that meaning, so the same integrity requires that we scan the sources of Christian history for the original meaning of the various liturgical feasts and seasons — with an eye toward finding the implication of such meanings for preaching today in the liturgical context.

The purpose of this study is to probe the origins and development of the Advent season to ascertain its original meaning. This is a task that must be undertaken with some uncertainty because the date of the origin of Advent is itself uncertain. F. Cabrol noted a long time ago that it is only in the sixth century that we have any indisputable evidence for the observance of an Advent season.[1] In that century the Councils of Tours (565) and Macon (581) refer to a period of penitential preparation for the Nativity lasting from Nov. 11, the Feast of St. Martin, until Christmas. Here is a season, then, which is comparable to Lent, lasting about 40 days, with fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays. Such a period, however, was already known to Gregory of Tours (bishop, 573—594), who is a witness to a period of fasting from St. Martin's Day until Christmas.[2]

We may be able, however, to push the origin of Advent back into the fourth century. The Council of Saragossa in Spain was held in 380 to deal with Priscillianism, a heresy which combined certain gnostic

[1] F. Cabrol, "L'Avent liturgique," *Revue Benedictine* (hereafter referred to as *RB*), 22 (1905), 484—95.

[2] Gregory of Tours listed these fasts in his *Historia Francorum:* "Post Quinquagesima quarta et sexta feria usque natale sancti Joannis. De kalendis Septembris usque kalendas Octobris bina in septimana jejunia. De kalendis Octobris usque depositionem domni Martini bina in septimana jejunia. A depositione domni Martini usque Natale Domini terna in septimana jejunia. De natali sancti Hilarii usque medium Februarium bina in septimana jejunia." J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Latinorum {P.L.}*, 71:566.

and ascetic ideas. The fourth canon of this council[3] has been cited to demonstrate the existence of Epiphany, but it also indicates a period of preparation for Epiphany beginning on Dec. 17 and lasting three weeks. During this time it was incumbent upon Christians to attend church daily, an injunction which no doubt reflected the concern of the local bishops to divert the attention of the faithful from the Roman Saturnalia, which also began on Dec. 17. But it could also have had to do with the preparation of the candidates for baptism on Epiphany. The Gothic Missal has a series of lessons which are to be read at the Vigil of the Epiphany which are similar to those read at the Easter Vigil. Furthermore, we have the letter of Bishop Siricius of Rome (384—399) to Bishop Himerius of Tarragona which indicates that baptisms took place in the Spanish Church on Christ's birthday or on Epiphany, that is, on Jan. 6.[4] W. C. Bishop discussed this possibility of a period of preparation for baptism at the Epiphany Vigil in the Spanish Church 60 years ago, indicating that in the *Orationale Gothicum* (the oldest Mozarabic service book) "the series of services of instruction is confined to three weeks, and not, as in the Ximenean printed service-books, extended to six weeks."[5] (Bishop also pointed out that in Spain and Gaul Epiphany was the second great day for public baptisms. This may be an imitation of the Eastern, especially Palestinian, custom of baptizing candidates at the beginning of the Epiphany season in conjunction with commemorating the baptism of Christ in the Jordan.)

The influence of the pre-Easter season of preparation can be seen in the varying lengths of Advent in Gaul. Since Lent was a 40-day period, Epiphany also had to have its *quadragesima.* Since Saturdays and Sundays were nonfasting days, it was necessary to begin the preparatory season on Nov. 11 (St. Martin's Day) if it were to be finished by Jan. 5. Hence the period came to be known as the *quadragesima S. Martini,* or "St. Martin's Lent." When the Nativity came to be celebrated on Dec. 25, the period of fasting was adjusted so that it would end on Dec. 24. Before 490, Bishop Perpetuus of Tours imposed a triweekly fast on his people lasting from St. Martin's Day until Christmas Eve, and the synod of Macon reiterated his ruling in 583.[6]

One can sometimes glean the meaning of a season from homiletical material, but such material for Advent is very sparse. There are two extant homilies of Maximus, bishop of Turin (415—466), entitled "In Adventu Domini," but he makes no ref-

[3] "Viginti et uno die quo a XVI kal. januarii usque in diem Epiphaniae, quae est viii idus Ianuarii, continuiis diebus, nulli liceat de ecclesia se absentare, nec latere in domibus, nec nudis pedibus incedere, sed concurrere ad ecclesiam. Quod qui non observaverit, his decretis anathema sit in perpetuum." Migne, *P. L.,* 85:66.

[4] Migne, *P. L.,* 13:1134.

[5] W. C. Bishop, "The Three Weeks' Advent of *Liber officiorum S. Hilarii," Journal of Theological Studies,* 10 (1909), 127—28.

[6] John Gunstone in *Christmas and Epiphany* (London: The Faith Press, 1967) reports that Caesarius of Arles (d. 542), in his *Regula virginum,* "preached about a five-day weekly fast lasting from November 1st to December 24th, obviously an attempt to fit in forty days of fasting in the eight weeks before Christmas. In some parts of the Carolingian empire there was a pre-Christmas season of three months, beginning on September 24th, a day kept as the Feast of the Conception of St. John the Baptist." (P. 81)

erence to a specific time of Advent. The title may be a copyist's addition. There is also a vague reference to a period of preparation for the birth of Christ in the extant homilies of Caesarius, bishop of Arles (502—542). We are on much firmer ground, however, to ascertain the original meaning of Advent from the lectionary tradition, one of the most basic of which is the 11th-century manuscript of Silos in Spain known as the *Liber comicus*. Morin[7] argues that it represents a practice which far antedates the time of its compilation, because old ways of worship were carefully preserved in Northern Spain at the time when a large part of Southern Spain was under Islamic domination. The *Liber comicus*, then, is a survival of usages of the primatial see of Toledo during the period of the Visigothic kings (seventh century). This lectionary has a five-Sunday Advent.

D. de Bruyne presented a study on the ninth-century Bible of Alcalá which contains handwritten marginal notes of almost the same date.[8] There are Advent notes for a number of passages, but particular Sundays are not indicated. There are, however, specific references to Advent I and V, which might therefore indicate a five-week Advent. No firm conclusion can be drawn from this evidence, but a hypothetical reconstruction may be attempted. One reading given for the First Sunday in Advent is Is. 2:1, which agrees with the reading for Advent I in the *Liber comicus*. A reading for the Fifth Sunday in Advent is Is. 35:1, which again agrees with the *Liber comicus*.[9]

The most outstanding Gallican lectionary, comparable to the *Liber comicus*, is the Lectionary of Luxeuil, which has been edited by P. Salmon.[10] This 7th- or 8th-century lectionary is missing the first leaves, but since the first series of lessons is for Christmas Day and this is designated as the eighth set, we may suppose that, counting Christmas Eve, there were six sets of lessons for Advent. Morin has also found some lectionaries which indicate a six-week Advent season in Carolingian Gaul.[11] Another important source book is

[7] G. Morin, "Le premier volume des Anecdota Maredsolana," *RB*, 9 (1892), 443—47.

[8] D. de Bruyne, "Un système de lectures de la Liturgie Mozarabe," *RB*, 34 (1922), 147 to 155.

[9] De Bruyne thinks that an Advent reading listed as Rom. 11:25-31, appointed in the *Liber comicus* for "First Lord's Day" belongs to Advent I, and that another reading for Advent V is Phil. 4:4, also listed in the *Liber comicus* as "Fifth Lord's Day." If we can read from the *Liber comicus* to the Bible of Alcalá, then it is possible to assign readings for the 2d and 3d Sundays, namely, 1 Cor. 4:1 and Col. 3:1. We have no reading in the Alcalá Bible designated for or corresponding with "Fourth Lord's Day" in the *Liber comicus*. However, there is another unspecified Advent reading, Col. 3:12, which could be a *lectio continua* from "III dominico."

[10] P. Salmon, *Le Lectionnaire de Luxeuil*, Vol. 7 in *Collectanea Biblica Latina* (Rome, 1944).

[11] G. Morin in "Le Lectionnaire de l'église de Paris au VII[e] siècle," *RB*, 10 (1893), 438 to 441, notes that the MS lat. 256 (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris), a Gospel book of the 7th century, has a number of marginal notes which are related to the liturgical readings. He suggests that this represents a liturgical order which could also be that of the Luxeuil codex. This Gospel book has readings for six Advent Sundays which are, in order, (1) John 1:35-51, (2) Matt. 24:15, (3) Matt. 11:2, (4) Luke 3:2, (5) Matt. 3:1, and (6) Matt. 21:1. Morin has also drawn attention to the Lectionary of Sél estat in Alsace in "Un lectionaire Mérovingien avec fragments du Texte Occidental des Actes," *RB*, 25 (1908), 161—63. This lectionary may be dated around 700 and contains

the Bobbio Missal, whose date and place of origin have been much disputed.[12] The striking thing about this missal is that it specifies only three Sundays in Advent.

There was no tradition in Rome for baptizing on Christmas or Epiphany, as the letter of Siricius makes clear. Public baptism in the conservative Roman Church, until the influx of transalpine traditions after the 10th century, was always at the Easter Vigil; hence there was no need in Rome of a "second Lent" preparatory to Epiphany. But some scholars have postulated an even older observance as the origin of Advent in Rome, the "fast of the tenth month" or the December Ember days. The Ember seasons *(quatuor tempora)* go back to early developments in the Roman calendar. During the Ember weeks the usual Wednesday and Friday fasts were extended over into Saturday and ended with a vigil and the eucharist in the early hours of Sunday morning. At first there were only three Ember weeks: in June, September, and December, with March added later. In a sermon given one December, Leo I said: "We keep the fast of springtime during Lent, that of the summer in Pentecost, that of the autumn in the seventh month, and that of winter in this, the tenth month."[13] Eventually the Roman tradition was to observe the December Ember days during the third week of a four-week Advent. The masses of the December Ember days are found at the end of Book II of the *Gelasian Sacramentary*. According to G. G. Willis, these masses "are archaic in form, unlike those of the later Gregorian reform."[14]

In the Roman liturgy of the December Embertide, the introit on Wednesday is Psalm 18 *(Caeli enarrant)*, which is related to the coming of Christ. There are two lessons before the Gospel reading: Is. 2:2-5, an eschatological prophecy (swords shall be beaten into plowshares), and Is. 7:10-15 ("Behold, a virgin shall conceive").[15] The Gospel for this mass is Luke 1:26-38, the Annunciation. These lessons do not portray the traditional theme of Embertide; they all have an Advent character. The same is true of the Friday pericopes: Is.

a list of Old Testament readings as well as lessons from Acts. Morin thinks that it derives from the region wherein it was found and that it reveals a six-Sunday Advent. A fragmentary Epistle lectionary of eight pages has been attached to this manuscript by a different hand which Morin believes is just as old as the rest of the manuscript. It disturbs the picture, however, by providing readings for Advent VI and VII.

12 According to Morin, in "D'ou provient le missel de Bobbio?" *RB*, 31 (1914), 326 to 332, the Bobbio Missal is a 7th-century document native to the southeastern part of Gaul, which at the time was dominated by the Visigothic kings of Spain. It was taken to Bobbio in northwestern Italy as a result of the Arab invasion of Iberia. A. Wilmart in "Le palimpseste du missel de Bobbio," *RB*, 33 (1921), 1—18, decided on the basis of the palimpsest leaves that the manuscript was written in the 7th century near Bobbio, the monastery in which a copy of the missal was found. In the *Dictionnaire d'archeologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, Vol. 2 (1910), cols. 939—62, Wilmart asserted that its home was Gaul. This was also the conclusion of E. A. Lowe. See Wilmart, Lowe, and Wilson, *The Bobbio Missal: Notes and Studies*, Vol. 61 of the Henry Bradshaw Society Publications (1924), especially Lowe's conclusion on p. 105.

13 *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 12 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 127.

14 G. G. Willis, *Essays in Early Roman Liturgy* (London: S. P. C. K., 1964), p. 87.

15 These readings are Nos. 161 and 162 in the Würzburg Lectionary; see G. Morin, "Le plus ancien comes ou lectionnaire de l'église Romaine," *RB*, 27 (1910), 41—47, and the Supplement, ibid., 28 (1911), 297—317.

11:1-5, concerning the pouring out of the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit, and Luke 1: 39-47, the Visitation, which is related to John the Baptist and, hence, another traditional Advent theme. The gradual for the Saturday Vigil is the introit for Wednesday, Psalm 18, and all six lessons before the Gospel[16] have Advent themes. As Willis observes: "Everything cited so far is concerned with Advent and Christmas, and none of it with the fruits of the earth or with other thoughts of Embertide. Most of it is preserved in the Roman Missal of the present day. It represents an assimilation to Advent which was a product of the Gregorian reform, and has firmly established its place in Roman tradition ever since."[17] Thus it would seem unlikely that the Roman Advent grew out of the December Embertide, as some have thought; rather, as the penitential character of the Gallican Advent made inroads in Rome the Embertide observance was correlated with it. The original character of Advent in the Roman tradition, therefore, is still ambiguous. Nor, as Cabrol has pointed out, did Advent in Rome immediately acquire a penitential character, for the alleluia, the *Gloria in excelsis,* and other joyous chants were not entirely curtailed.[18] Moreover, the *Ordo Romanum XI* (Mabillon's edition), around A. D. 1140, specifies that the pope is to celebrate mass *honorifice* with his full entourage, wearing his crown and white vestments. Only in the 13th century were violet vestments introduced in imitation of Lent.

Advent acquired its quasi-penitential character only when Gallican elements were mixed with the Roman, because Advent did not serve as a season of preparation for baptism in Rome. Its character was that of a joyous looking forward to the parousia. The liturgical texts also point to such a conclusion. The preponderance of these texts express joy not in a nativity which has already taken place but a hope in the parousia yet to come. Such is the character, for example, of most of the Advent collects in both the Gelasian and the Gregorian Sacramentaries.[19] The preparatory theme which these prayers state is that of vigilance. This is also the theme of some of the pericopes. The Gospel for the First Sunday in Advent in the Roman Missal (second Sunday in the *Book of Common Prayer, The Lutheran Liturgy,* and the *Service Book and Hymnal*), Luke 21:25-33 [36], is the Lukan apocalypse relating the signs of the time with the accompanying warning, "Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." This saying is accompanied by the parable of the fig tree and the approach of summer, which again could be taken as a concern for vigilance, especially since harvest and vintage throughout the Bible symbolize the Last

16 Is. 19:20-22; Is. 35:1-7; Is. 40:9-11; Is. 45:1-8; Dan. 3; 2 Thess. 2:1-8.

17 Willis, p. 88.

18 Cabrol, p. 489. "Il est certain que les plus anciens documents liturgiques que nous avons cités, n'ont pas ce caractère de pénitence."

19 Two examples: "Excita, quaesumus, domine, potenciam tuam et ueni, ut hii qui in tua pietate confidunt, ab omni cicius aduersitatebus liberentur." No. 1141 in L. C. Mohlberg, *Liber sacramentorum romanae aeclesiae ordinis anni circuli* (Rome: Case Editrice Herder, 1968), p. 172. "Excita, domine, quaesumus, corda nostra ad praeparandas unigeniti tui uias, ut per eius aduentum purificatis tibi seruire mentibus mereamur." Ibid., No. 1125, p. 170. (The collect for the Second Sunday in Advent of the Lutheran rite)

Judgment.[20] The same theme can be found in the Epistle for Advent I (here *The Lutheran Liturgy* and the *Service Book* agree with the Roman Missal), Rom. 13:11-14: "The night is far spent; the day is at hand. Therefore, let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light." [21]

In the various lectionaries to which we have referred, along with the Ambrosian, there are about 10 different Gospel pericopes used recurrently on the Sundays in Advent.[22] These 10 lections may be divided into four general themes: (1) the end of the world and the signs of the times, (2) the mission of John the Baptist (calling men to repentance and conversion — *metanoia* — because of the impending irruption of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus the Christ), (3) the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem (a type of the Messianic arrival), and (4) the Annunciation and Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Only this last theme is in any way directly related to the historical nativity of Christ. We cannot dismiss the theme of the Nativity out of hand as an early theme of Advent because the Advent season was developing at a time when, in the post-Constantinian era, the church was accommodating itself to historical existence (or to what Gregory Dix has called "the sanctification of time"). One of the ways of "sanctifying time" was to proliferate the number of historical commemorations, especially those having to do with the life and work of Christ, such as Christmas and the Ascension. Neverthe-

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[20] See Matt. 13:39, "The harvest is the close of the age." Compare also Mark 4:29; Matt. 3:12; Matt. 13:30; Rev. 14:15. Jeremias has tried to interpret the parable independently of its context in Mark 13 (the so-called "little Apocalypse"), so that the budding fig tree is not a sign of the end, but a sign of Jesus' ministry. This agrees more with the application Luke has given the parable: when you see the signs of Jesus' ministry, then know that the kingdom is near. In the canonical application, however, in both Mark and Luke, the parable serves as an eschatological exhortation to the church, and it is possible to preach on a text according to its *canonical* level as well as according to its *source* level. In fact, the liturgical context of preaching often demands it.

The Gospel for Advent I in the *Service Book and Hymnal,* the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-9), is also capable of bearing an eschatological emphasis in the liturgical context. It can be related, as it is by Jean Danielou, in *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 1956), pp. 333 to 347, to the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles (in its later development). On the seventh day of the Feast the participants waved their branches *(lulab)* to the song of Hosanna and the Benedictus of Ps. 118 in expectancy of the arrival of the Messiah. Entering the city on an ass, Jesus fulfilled the description of the Messianic king in Zech. 9:9, as did the presence of the crowd itself. For Zechariah prophesied the eschatological time when "everyone that survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles." (Zech. 14:16)

[21] Lloyd Gaston, *No Stone on Another* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), has demonstrated that there existed in the church, in addition to kerygmatic preaching and didactic preaching, a prophetic *paraclesis,* the purpose of which was to "exhort the brethren" and give them consolation in the situation of the tribulation of the last days before the arrival of the kingdom. Rom. 13:11-14 is an example of such eschatological exhortation, along with Mark 13, 1 Thess, 5:1-11, 2 Thess, 2:1-15, Eph. 6:10-18, 1 Pet. 4:7 and 5:8, and Jas. 5:7-9. The function of this exhortatory preaching can be summed up in the words of Mark 13:13, "He who endures to the end will be saved."

[22] These 10 lections include: Luke 21:25; Matt. 11:2; John 1:19; Luke 3:1; Matt. 3:1-11; Matt. 21:1-9; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 1:26-38; prophecies in Matt. 24; Annunciation and Magnificat in Luke. See the chart in Cabrol, pp. 494—95.

less, the church has never ceased to live in eschatological tension and these commemorative feasts never completely became merely historical. Moreover, with regard to Advent, it would be illogical to pray for a coming that has already taken place. One prays and hopes for that which is not yet.

What, then, shall we make of the Old Testament prophetic texts which have become traditional during Advent and which are a part of the core substance of the Advent *synaxes?* Here we must remember the principal that Scripture is its own interpreter, which is tied up with the confession of the basic unity of the Bible (including the unity of the two Testaments). This means that we must interpret the Old Testament along principles of interpretation established in the New Testament. The New Testament invariably interprets the Old from the perspective of the fulfillment of all things in Christ, that is, from an eschatological perspective. At the same time we must remember that while the kingdom and the new age have been inaugurated with the coming of Christ, they have not yet been completely established. The hope of the Old Testament is still in part our hope. What was this hope? It was the establishment of God's kingdom, the destruction of the powers of evil, and the abolition of sin and death. The fact that Christ has come does not quench this hope; it intensifies it. The historical life and work of the Christ gives us all the more reason for expressing a lively and joyful hope.[23]

This is the meaning of Advent, and liturgical preaching during this season should be a proclamation of the coming reign of God and an exhortation to preparedness and vigilance so that when the kingdom is completely established, we may be included in it. All this should orient us toward and prepare us not primarily — far less exclusively — for the nativity at Bethlehem, but for the parousia, the manifestation in glory of the eternal king. Because Christ has appeared, hope is fanned to a high degree of intensity and this intensity is vented in the prayers of the Christ-Mass, "that, as we have known on earth the mysteries of that Light [which has come], we may also come to the fulness of its joys in heaven . . ." (collect for Christmas Night). "For in the mystery of the Word made flesh, Thou hast given us a new revelation of Thy glory; that seeing Thee in the person of Thy Son, we may be drawn to the love of those things which are not seen." (Preface for Christmas in the English-language Lutheran rite)

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[23] See Louis Bouyer's discussion of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany in *Liturgical Piety* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955), pp. 200—14. Bouyer suggests that the eschatological material was inserted into the celebration of Christmas at the end of the 4th century precisely to reanimate eschatological fervor at the time when the Constantinian church was becoming well established in the historical world order.