

It's About Time
Advent 1, Year A
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The Scriptural & Liturgical Texts of Advent 1

✠ In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

“It’s about time!” This was the entirely reasonable reaction of a parishioner when informed that the new railings for the southwest stairs had finally been installed so that this long-closed entrance to the church could at last be re-opened. It was in the nick of time, too, since today, the first Sunday in Advent, marks a new liturgical year, a time for new beginnings.

“It’s about time!” was my attitude this past Friday when our new dalmatic and tunicle, along with two brand-new violet stoles, arrived from Watts in London, England, having been shipped only this past Wednesday. I was highly skeptical that they would actually clear customs and get here in time for today’s long-expected premiere, but here they are.

It’s about time. Advent is *all about time*, and not just *any* time, but a specific period of waiting and expectation, full of eager anticipation and eschatological urgency. As *The Living Church* magazine’s lectionary commentary puts it,

For a few moments [of time] and with some effort...we are invited to step out of the world, which is what we do every time we come to church, and live and breathe the church’s own liturgical life, which is, fundamentally, the active and real presence of Christ. Christ is here and Christ speaks, and today he says nothing of his birth. He speaks not of his first Advent, his first arrival, but of his final coming at the close of the age. Speaking of the end of all things, Jesus says, “But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matt. 24:36). “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (Matt. 24:42). Keep vigil and be ready. The Lord is coming and you do not know when. The Nicene Creed uses the future participle to highlight the immediacy and suddenness of Christ’s final coming, saying, “he is about to come to judge the living and the dead.” The customary English translation, using the future tense...obscures this entirely. He is about to come at any moment!

Before I read this commentary, I hadn’t known that particular grammatical detail about the creed, but it makes perfect sense. When we say (or, in this parish, chant), “And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: Whose kingdom shall have no end,” it is easy to think of this as something that will happen “someday” but certainly not *today*. But were the Second Coming to be *today*, I hope our reaction would be, “It’s about time! Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

In Advent, we are invited to reclaim the notion that Jesus “*is about to come* to judge the living and the dead.” We are invited to live *as if* Jesus is about to appear at any moment. We are invited to say: It’s about time that Jesus should come again in glory. Even as the very thought of it fills us with dread and longing in equal measure, we are invited to “cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light”, so “that we, without shame or fear, may rejoice to behold his appearing.”

This past Thursday, as Anne and her mother, Linda, prepared a delicious American Thanksgiving dinner, my father-in-law, Rich, and I enjoyed a Bach cantata in the chapel at Trinity College; the theme of the concert was light. Among other pieces, the schola sang Motet 118B, which musicologists speculate was written to be sung at funeral—perhaps even Bach’s own. The text translates as:

O Jesus Christ, light of my life,
my refuge, my comfort, my reassurance,
on earth I am only a guest
And the burden of sin presses down heavily upon me.

Or, as Professor [Z\[ed\]. Philip Ambrose](#) renders it more poetically,

O Jesus Christ, my life’s true light,
My prize, my strength, hope to my sight,
On earth here am I but a guest
And by sin’s burden sore oppressed.¹

The author of the original German text, Martin Behm, served as the pastor of the Lutheran church in Breslau for thirty-six years beginning in 1586. According to one biographer, he “was highly esteemed as an able preacher and faithful shepherd of souls throughout a long period of distress [which included] (famine, [in] 1590, pestilence, [in] 1616; [and] war, [in] 1619.”²

I bellyache so often about this accursed pandemic we have suffered from these past few years, that when I read of a pastor whose ministry spanned famine, pestilence, and war, I have to consider how fortunate, so far, I’ve actually been.

An unnamed commentator notes in one online guide to Bach’s cantatas, “On the evidence of these works alone, it would be fair to say that the composer and his contemporaries viewed life as a grand rehearsal for death. Certainly the congregations at Leipzig’s main churches were regularly reminded of their mortality and earthly failings from the pulpit, and Bach underlined this in his church cantatas. But he also offered the faithful a musical foretaste of the comfort and joy of eternal salvation.”³

Nowadays, we tend to think of ourselves as more insulated from the vicissitudes of life. As safer. We afford ourselves the luxury—the folly, really—of viewing life as something other than one long grand dress rehearsal for death. The Lutherans of four centuries ago understood the fragility of “the time of this mortal life” better than we—that on earth here below we are only guests, and by death and disease are sore oppressed. They knew, as perhaps we are only now discovering, that we cannot put on our bodies any piece of human-made armour that will preserve us from *all* the works of

¹ <https://www.uvm.edu/~classics/faculty/bach/BWV118.html>

² <https://www.bach-cantatas.com/Lib/Behm.htm>

³ <https://www.classicfm.com/composers/bach/guides/bach-cantatas/>

darkness, but we *can* clad ourselves at all times with the armour of *light*. And that is what we are called to do today: We are invited—commanded—to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” I would suggest we are also called, at times, to make no provision for the flesh to assuage its *fears*. For both what we desire and what we fear can lead us into darkness.

Advent invites us to emerge from whatever darkness of fear or desire we find ourselves enveloped by, and to come out into the light, to begin again, to experience the timelessness of eternity in real time, to anticipate, with both eagerness *and* dread, the end of all time, when Jesus Christ will come again to judge both the living and the dead. And we are called to act fearlessly in the face of our fears, because Jesus Christ is indeed light of our life, our refuge, our comfort, our reassurance, our strength, and hope to our sight.

At Trinity College this past Thursday, the schola also sang Cantata 61, which was written for the First Sunday of Advent. Reflecting on the start of a new liturgical year, a tenor sang an aria, entitled “Komm, Jesu, komm zu deiner Kirche”, which I don’t recall ever hearing before. In English, the lyrics translate:

Come, Jesus, come to your church
and grant us a blessed new year!
Increase the honour of your name,
Preserve sound teaching
and bless pulpit and altar!

Let us make this our prayer today: “Come, Jesus, come to your church, and grant us a blessed new year! Increase the honour of your name, preserve sound teaching, and bless pulpit and altar!”

We increase the honour of Jesus’ name when we live as if what we proclaim with our lips in word and chant and song are true. When we choose to live, with God’s help, in hope, despite the horrors of plague, pestilence, and famine, battle and murder, and sudden death. Advent holds out the hope of a life that gives us joy despite all the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

And God will preserve sound teaching and bless pulpit and altar when we bring ourselves, our souls and bodies, our hearts, our minds, our souls, and our collective strength to pay heed. We will find succour, help, and comfort despite all any danger, necessity, or tribulation because the pulpit and altar point us in the way that we should go. The pulpit, even when the preacher is thoroughly mediocre, gives us an opportunity to bring the head and the heart into dialogue with each other. And the altar, even when the liturgy isn’t particularly exciting, is always the place where heaven and earth are brought into contact with each other. We just need to have ears to hear and eyes to see. For when we are paying attention, we can heed Isaiah’s call, “Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!” Isaiah is saying, in essence, that *it’s about time* we decided to do so. It’s about time we started walking in the light of the Lord.

So, what is Advent all about? It's about time. And it's about time we make a decision to begin again, not controlled by the darkness of any unseemly desires or paralyzing fears, but liberated by the light of Christ. It's about time we cast off the armour of fear and darkness and put on the armour of hope and light. The way we do this will differ depending on how much we are willing to risk to walk in the light of the Lord. Some of us may not be ready to give up on the time of this mortal life just yet, and there are many reasons why we decide to take or avoid the risks we do. But whatever choices we make in seeking that armour of light, through faith in Christ, we can find freedom from the fear that has gripped us for nigh on three years by living today as if Christ will surely return tomorrow.

Live today as if Christ will surely return tomorrow. It's about time we did that, don't you think?

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