



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Three Advents
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 26-32)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2010 The Center for Christian Ethics

The Three Advents

For Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and his modern interpreter, Thomas Merton, the season of Advent is a “sacrament” of the presence of God in his world, in the mystery of Christ at work through his Church, preparing in a hidden, obscure way for the final manifestation of his kingdom.

Prayer

Meditation†

Advent is the “sacrament” of the presence of God in His world, in the Mystery of Christ at work in History.... This mystery is the revelation of God Himself in His Incarnate Son. But it is not merely a manifestation of the Divine Perfections, it is the concrete plan of God for the salvation of men and the restoration of the whole world in Christ.

Thomas Merton

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

Reflection

“God comes among us precisely in order to bring us salvation,” Fr. James Conner observes, “But we are slow to recognize our true and profound need.” Both Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Merton view Advent as a time to recognize our deep need for transformation in Christ. Reducing Advent to a bustling preparation for Christmas can keep us centered on and distracted by immediate, superficial projects—implicitly denying our need for a savior by ignoring Christ’s coming.

Though we need Christ, our transformation is more a coming of God to us than our turning to God by our own power. If we abandon ourselves to God’s power, he will deliver us. According to Conner, “This is the mystery of Advent: God’s descent to our lowliness out of pure love, not for any merit of our own.” We must go to meet the transforming action of the Holy Spirit; but we do not need to travel far to find Christ. Bernard tells us: “If you wish to meet God, go as far as your own heart.” We do this not by introspection, but by spiritual self-examination and compunction. This spiritual encounter is an advent, in which God comes to our inmost self and we find ourselves in God.

Bernard enriches our reflection during Advent by calling attention to three advents in which God comes to humankind:

- ▶ In *the first Advent to humankind*, God comes to seek and save that which was lost. Christ comes as a human child, who is like us in all things except sin. Meditating on this Advent, we grow in hope for the promise of salvation offered.
- ▶ In *the second Advent into humankind*, Christ is present in our souls at every moment of life. He comes as the one who is hidden within our hearts, in every person we encounter, and in every event of life. Conner says this Advent is characterized by anguish and conflict: we are torn between fear that we will fail to recognize the Lord’s return and joy at recognizing God’s presence and call to us in love.



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Heather Hughes, the author of this study guide, is the publication specialist and project coordinator for the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University.

© 2010 The Center for Christian Ethics

► In the third Advent *against humankind*, Christ will return as the glorious Lord who is all in all. He will draw the redeemed of all ages to himself. The Apostle Paul's prayer in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 reminds us that Christ is at work in our lives to prepare us for his return. If we face this final Advent with humility and sincerity of heart, we have nothing to fear.

We live in a moment between the first and third Advents, with an opportunity to welcome into our lives Christ, the Word of God. To do so we must first "unite ourselves with His truth by our *humility*," Thomas Merton writes, "to keep ourselves convinced that we can do nothing without Him and that therefore must receive all from Him."

We have nothing good that we did not receive from God, for God is ever coming with his life-giving presence: in the Christ Child of the first Advent, in the hearts of his followers of the second Advent, and in glory at the third Advent. "The mystery of Advent is the mystery of God coming to us at every moment," Conner concludes.

Study Questions

1. During Advent, why is it valuable to reflect on each of the three Advents described by Bernard of Clairvaux? What does each one teach us about the coming of God?
2. What does Thomas Merton mean when he refers to the season of Advent as a "sacrament"?
3. God must come to us precisely because we cannot go to God. "Lying paralyzed on our mats we could not reach the divine height," Bernard writes. What are Bernard's three explanations for our misery and helplessness? If this is accurate, how can we participate in our own sanctification?
4. How does the Charles Wesley's hymn "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" creatively incorporate all three Advents?

Departing Hymn: "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"

Come, thou long expected Jesus
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.
Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a king,
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal Spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all sufficient merit,
raise us to thy glorious throne.

Charles Wesley (1745)

Tune: HYFRYDOL

† Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration: Meditations on the Cycle of Liturgical Feasts* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), 61 and 53.

The Three Advents

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Meditation	Meditation
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To examine how God comes to humankind through “the three Advents” discussed by Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Merton.
2. To consider how the season of Advent is a “sacrament.”
3. To explore how Advent helps us understand our profound need for God and prepare to receive the transforming action of the Holy Spirit.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Advent Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus” locate the familiar tune HYFRYDOL in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with an Observation

How does Christ come to us today in what Bernard of Clairvaux calls the “second Advent”? Christ comes in a way that fits our desperate need. Humanity, through the persons of Adam and Eve, tried to steal what belongs to the Son of God. We bought Satan’s deceptive invitation to “be like God” (Genesis 3:5). Bernard writes that to this sin the Son responds:

“Therefore, so that they may know that I love the Father, let those whom he seems somehow to have lost on my account be restored to him through me....

“They all envied me. I am coming and I am showing myself to be such that anyone who chooses to be envious, who aches to imitate me, may do so, and this emulation may become a good thing.” (“On the Six Aspects of Advent,” Sermon 1, paragraph 4).

We had been overthrown by malice from without, so love from without can benefit us.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for grace to meet the transforming action of the Holy Spirit in our souls.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study explores how the Advent season is characterized by a strange mixture of holy fear and joy. Bernard of Clairvaux, reflecting on three Advents (*to* humankind, *into* humankind, and *against* humankind) explains

how hope, examination, and contrition are related in the Christian life. As we examine our helplessness and need for the light of God, we take a first step to meet the transforming action of the God who ever comes.

Study Questions

1. Bernard of Clairvaux says, "We know His threefold coming: *to* humankind, *into* humankind and *against* humankind. *To* all He comes without distinction, but not so *into* all or *against* all." God through Christ comes *to* us as a child through the Incarnation of Jesus in the first Advent. He comes mysteriously *into* the hearts of those who welcome his coming in the second Advent. And in the third Advent, he will come again in glory *against* all the powers of evil in order to judge the living and the dead.

Invite three small groups to discuss the significance of each Advent. What does each one reveal about God, and about humankind? What emotions and attitudes are appropriately formed in our hearts as we remember each one during the Advent season? Through what practices is each one best remembered and celebrated?

As the groups come back together and report their conversations, encourage members to examine how each of the three Advents is emphasized or ignored in their congregations.

2. A sacrament, as the term is used here, is an action or practice that reveals God's working in our lives; it is a window into the divine life that becomes a conduit of God's grace.

"The liturgical year brings us the life of Christ from his birth at Christmas to his death, resurrection, and bestowal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost," Fr. James Conner, OCSO notes. Participating in, meditating on, and celebrating each season of the church year can lead to real transformation in Christ.

Thomas Merton writes, "Evidently, the work of Christ in us as 'Lord of virtues' is to produce in us His own virtues, to transform us into Himself as we contemplate Him in the Mystery of Advent, imitating his humble, hidden and sacrificial life." For Conner, the heart of the "sacrament of Advent" is God's divine action within us, transforming us with humble eagerness to receive God through Christ, who is the revealed Word.

3. Conner writes, "Bernard says that there are three reasons for our misery and helplessness: we are easily deceived in our judgments of good and evil; we are weak in our attempt to do good; and we are slow in resisting evil." Though our state of being is lamentable, "the presence of Christ in us overcomes these obstacles. By faith he dwells in our hearts and shows us how to judge between good and evil. By fortitude he strengthens our weakness, so that we can do all things in him. And finally, he resists evil within us." Encourage members to give specific examples of how they have experienced helplessness in each of these ways. How have they experienced Christ's help in response to each form of our helplessness?

We cannot overcome our helplessness in our own power. "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it," Paul assures us (1 Thessalonians 5:24). Conner writes, "The secret is to abandon ourselves to Christ, the power of God, and then he will deliver us from forces that we could not resist by ourselves."

This does not mean that we do *nothing*; indeed, there is much work to do. "To find the Word in our heart we must enter into ourselves not so much by introspection as by compunction," Conner reminds us. "We must go to meet the transforming action of the Holy Spirit within our souls. This spiritual encounter is an advent in which God comes to our inmost self and we find ourselves in him. Bernard conceives this as liberation, a breaking from the prison of 'selfhood.'" Discuss the difference between introspection and compunction. In what other ways can we affirm and assist the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts?

4. Charles Wesley's hymn beautifully incorporates all three Advents. Christ comes as a child in the first Advent: "born a child and yet a king." He comes into our receptive hearts in the second Advent: "born to reign in us forever.... / By thine own eternal Spirit / rule in all our hearts alone." And he comes in glory to judge evil and draw the redeemed to himself: "By thine all sufficient merit, / raise us to thy glorious throne." Discuss how Wesley draws out subtle truths of the season by integrating the three Advents in this way.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.