

## Advent I (3 December 2023)

“...now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.”

+In the Name...

Happy New Year! No, you did not fall asleep for the last month of 2023, only to wake up just in time for the first Sunday of January. It is still 2023, but it is the first Sunday of Advent, which in liturgical-speak, is the first Sunday of the Church year. If you follow along with the readings for Mass in your Book of Common Prayer, you will notice that today is the first set of lessons in that section of the prayer book.

It was not always this way in Holy Mother Church. As near as we can tell, Easter was first considered the beginning of the new Church Year. One can see the logic there as nothing encapsulates why the

Christian faith exists as well as the Resurrection. The Eastern Church still uses Easter as the beginning of the new Church Year. The Roman Church followed the civil custom of beginning the new year in March, which would always be before Easter but would vary as to exactly how much before. You may remember that Christmas was relatively late in being added to the Christian Kalendar, not until the fourth century, which is partially why it is considered a lesser feast than Easter or Pentecost. At that point the Roman Church made Christmas the new start of the Church Year.

Meanwhile, in France and Spain the Church there was introducing the season of Advent. There is disagreement now as to how penitential and Lent-like Advent should be, but for the French church it was definitely a little Lent, complete with fasting and discipline as the soon-to-be new members prepared for their baptisms at Epiphany. They even stretched it out to forty days by starting it on

the 11<sup>th</sup> of November to coincide with the feast day of St. Martin, the patron saint of Gaul.

It would be 200 years before the Roman Church would adopt Advent, but limited it to only four week with a decidedly less penitential feel to it: one more of subdued preparation. It was another 200 years before the adoption of Advent was widespread and considered the beginning of the Church Year. In addition, Advent would take on the second theme of awaiting not just the coming of Christ in the manger, but also His second coming at the end of time.

Our Epistle this morning gives us a sense of this newness: it is time to wake up, as it is a new day; or it was a new day but we have slept in! The night is far spent, it is long gone, and the new day is upon us. We are to cast off the works of darkness, and put on the new armor of light, that now-famous phrase of Holy Scripture because St.

Augustine was reading it as the moment of his conversion, according to his confessions.

But newness and change are not always pleasant words in the vocabulary of a traditional Anglican. We like things to remain the same: if we wanted to go to the church-of-what's-happening now, we would not drive clear across town to get to St. Mark's, thank you for asking. But Christ calls us to always renew ourselves. The faith does not change, but what helps us to practice that faith in one period of our lives may not work at another time.

This past week the Church celebrated the feast of Bl. Nicholas Ferrar. Most of the saints we celebrate at St. Mark's are from before the Great Schism between Western and Eastern Christianity in 1054, but at least from before the split caused by the Protestant Reformation. Ferrar however, is clearly placed in the Church of England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was born into a wealthy family, but

that family lost most of its fortune in the Virginia Company and its expeditions to the New World. He served in Parliament for a while, and he was no stranger to the who's who of the time: he knew Sir Walter Raleigh, which is likely how the family got involved in the Virginia Company. He was ordained by William Laud, who at the time was Bishop of St. David in Wales, but would become the Archbishop of Canterbury under Charles I. He also knew George Herbert, priest and author. In fact, on Herbert's death bed, he sent a copy of his manuscript of *The Temple* to Ferrar, asking him to print it if he thought it worthwhile and to burn it if not. Aren't we lucky that Ferrar decided to print it?! And he attracted the attention of the King himself with his community at Little Gidding. But I am getting ahead of myself.

At the time of the English Reformation, all the monasteries in England were closed by Henry VIII. Far finer minds than mine have

written hundreds of books on whether these actions were justified. Much land and money were locked up in the monasteries. Henry said the money and power was being abused. The monks and the Roman Church said that Henry just wanted the money and lands. Regardless, there had been no monasteries, monks, or nuns in England for 100 years. After the loss of much of the Ferrar family fortune, Nicholas and his family decided to move to the nearly-deserted town of Little Gidding. He was not married, but he moved there with his brother and his family, and their sister and her family. The property they bought consisted of a decaying manor house and the village church, both of which they restored. They moved there to take on a life away from the world, living according to High Church Anglican principles, as contained in the Book of Common Prayer.

We can see this as a precursor to Anglican religious houses, but there were no vows taken. The members could come and go as they

pleased. There was no formal Rule, but someone was always assigned to pray in the chapel. While the members were accused of being Protestant nuns, they were loyal to the Church of England and her liturgy. Far from being recluses, they provided education and health care services to the village children. They even taught the young girls Latin, a very progressive notion of the time! Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the leaders of the Oxford Movement, to which this Parish looks for its spiritual foundations, would look to Little Gidding when religious orders were re-established in Anglicanism. T. S. Eliot would write a poem about the community.

What new thing are you going to do this Advent, this “new year”? Do you fancy starting a religious community in the English countryside? Likely not. The Ferrar family was called to a bigger undertaking than we might want, but we are in our second year of ministry together now here in this place. It seems like every week I

read of another congregation in the area that is closing or at least selling its building. We are still here, but only by the grace of God. We must never stop working for His glory, by discerning His will for us. It is a new church year, and as the epistle states, a new day. Each of us must cast off the works of darkness and share the light of Christ with those who have been placed in our lives.

+In the Name...