

Focus: The Lord's coming *in mensa* calls the faithful to attend the Lord's call of what **needs** to enter the church and through the church to the world. Among these particular means are fasting, almsgiving and prayer (intercession).

Function: To cast the discipline of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer in advent in light of the comings of the Lord. To encourage the faithful to take up these practices with deeper knowledge and new resolve.

"But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof." (Rm. 13.14)

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I. Understanding the Incarnation through the Passion

Advent is perhaps the most elusive of liturgical seasons. It is not only the one that is most obviously out of step with the world. While we mediate on darkness and take up fasting, and penitence the world is bathed in overbearing light, indulgence and conceit. But advent also is the coming together of themes of salvation history that often seem contradictory:

- i. Penitence and Joy
- ii. Darkness and light
- iii. Exile and Restoration

Indeed, the grace of Advent is that it prefigures that seemingly most contradictory of all: **THE WORD MADE FLESH**. The ineffable and eternal Word of God entering into contingency; the un-circumscribable becoming circumscribed. And so, as we embark on this journey to remember the Lord's coming in the flesh in Bethlehem and His coming again in glory to judge the quick and the dead, and His coming to our very soul's (and to the world through the Church) we hear the story of the Lord's final entry into Jerusalem-the beginning of the road to his Passion. This lesson reflects all of the internal tensions of advent because it calls us to read the Lord's coming in the light of His death. The Joy of the Incarnation within the lowly pomp of assent to the Cross on an ass and on the colt the foal of an ass.

The Lord's assent to Jerusalem on an ass and on the colt the foal of an ass as it comes to us in the lectionary acts, therefore, as a prefiguration from the passion, to the incarnation. The Lord in choosing the ass, and the colt, the foal of an ass, chooses the meekest and lowliest means. The Eternal, Almighty God restores His presence (Shekinah) to the Temple, not in the pillar of cloud and fire, but on an ass. The King of Israel, the branch of David, is enthroned at Jerusalem not in triumphal procession but on a colt the foal of an ass. Likewise, the Eternal, Almighty God, restores His presence to His Temple the World carried in the womb of a young woman (virgin). The King enthroned in a manger where the sheep eateth hay.

The Lord chose to enter the Temple at Jerusalem in this way. The Lord chose to enter His Temple the World in this way. Indeed, the Gospel tells us that the Lord had **NEED** of the ass, and the colt the foal of the ass. This need that the Lord articulates is a choice but it is a deeper choice and a different need than we would usually associate with these words. The Lord's need of the ass is an election which reveals the Lord's *nature*. The Godhead does not

experience need in the way that we do. The Trinity is complete in itself. He suffers no lack and no want. So if the Lord says He has need of something it must be thus because it reveals who the Lord *is*. The means must be fundamental to the revelation such that no substitution is acceptable.

The scriptures reflect again and again on how the Lord chooses to reveal Himself in weakness, and humility. He has need of these things because they are what reflect who He is. We should, therefore, not be surprised when the Lord draws near to our souls by grace that He would appoint means of weakness and humility as reveal His nature. Just as the Lord had need of the ass so He has need of our offerings of self-abasement in fasting, and self-giving love in almsgiving and prayer (intercession). These disciplines reflect who the Lord is: perfect Love and sacrificial Lordship. In advent we are called to put on Christ. But how do we put on Christ? Through fasting, almsgiving, and prayer (intercession).

II. Fasting, Almsgiving and Prayer (Intercession): The Lord needs them.

Advent is perhaps the hardest fasting season to cope with intellectually, and socially. The world around us is indulging. And our friends, family and neighbours are inviting us to as well. And we know that we can and that joy and festivities are good: they are meet and right. But we also know that being prepared is essential. That joy is balanced by penitence, restoration only comes through exile, light breaks the darkness. So, my offering and encouragement to us all is that we look with renewed hearts to the advent fast. That we take up with joy fasting, almsgiving and prayer not merely as cold self-denial sucking the fun out of life but as the very donkey by which the Lord comes to our souls and through us to the world.

Blessed Paul exhorts us to awake out of our sleep; that our salvation is near at hand. He calls us to cast off the works of darkness; to walk honestly; to put on Christ. And when we ask ourselves, “How do I put on Christ?” we often, at this time of year, reach for the great and triumphant occasions: carol services with sacred ministers decked in purple; Midnight Mass with the Church packed as the Crucifer raises the Cross in triumphal procession and the organ trumpets “O Come all ye faithful.” And these are good, and true, but we often forget the basics. The Lord comes to us meek and lowly, in the humbling of ourselves in fasting (acknowledging man does not live by bread alone), in the sacrificial love of almsgiving (I can only be fully I when I love another); and prayer (seeking the good for those we love, those we want to love, and those we cannot love). When we fast, we are prepared in the Spirit, the War Horses of our pride and vainglory are transfigured into the lowly ass of which the Lord has need. When we give alms in secret and inhabit that self-giving love to another we are prepared in the same Spirit to give ourselves to the Lord, casting off the darkness and being clothed in the armour of light.

The Lord doesn't suffer lack, he gives himself to us as a free gift. There is nothing that we can do to force the Lord to come to our souls, to merit is forgiveness. But the Lord has chosen means for us to pray with our bodies “Come Lord Jesus.” The Lord has need of our fasting, almsgiving and prayer, because they reflect his very nature. There is no substitute. We have come as the faithful, willingly and in love, to observe advent and be prepared to celebrate the nativity, to pray for His coming in glory. Will you allow yourselves to be prepared? Will you take up the means that the Lord provides? The means of fasting, almsgiving and prayer. What will you say when the apostle comes and says “the Lord has need of them.”