

A Homily for Advent by Ken Burton

December 3, 2006

Forty years ago, in the 1966-67 academic year, I was in the midst of my first, and only, year at Union Seminary in New York. That was one of the more difficult periods of my life. I had just finished four years of a somewhat isolated and protected undergraduate experience at a small college in Ohio. It was my first experience of living in an apartment in Manhattan. I was, in many ways, not emotionally prepared for the rigors of graduate work. The academic year ended badly, with me dropping out of seminary before the end of the spring term, never to return. One of the theological concepts that I picked up during that those hard months and which remains with me is that of the *proleptic presence of the Kingdom*. This is the idea that the Reign of Christ, aka God's Kingdom or the Kingdom of Heaven is both a much-anticipated future event and a real and living present reality, and that, at least since Easter morning, we human beings have been living in a world in which justice, peace and truth are erupting in our midst, even as we anticipate their future fuller embodiment and even as we acknowledge the places where, at least to our eyes, they are simply absent.

Today is both the first Sunday in our new liturgical year, somewhat prosaically designated "Year C," and the First Sunday in Advent. If there is one single word that best describes the spirit of Advent, that word is *waiting*. Moreover, if we get two words to sum it up, they might well be *anticipatory*

waiting. Something is about to happen, something big, something important, something special. In the words of our liturgical theme, taken directly from Jeremiah 33, "*The days are surely coming!*"

So what is it that we are waiting for? What is this anticipation about? Those questions have several answers, depending on the context.

One ancient answer, from more northern latitudes, is that we are awaiting the return of the sun. The star at the center of our solar system, the ultimate source of all energy on the earth, has either disappeared entirely from the sky or blessed us with its presence for fewer hours of each day, and we eagerly anticipate the start of the reversal of these conditions that is the Winter Solstice. *The days are surely coming!*

Another very different answer, rooted in our own political context, is that we are awaiting the report of the Iraq Study Group, due this week and then the new Congress to convene in January, with a woman as Speaker of the House for the first time. We anticipate that these events might provide some direction and energy for getting ourselves and the people of Iraq out of the mess we have together made of that country. *The days are surely coming!*

A third answer is that we anticipate giving and receiving gifts, a wonderful part of all of the major religious and secular holidays in December and early January. There is, somewhere in each of us, that little boy or girl who simply

cannot wait to see what is in the wrapped presents under the tree. *The days are surely coming!*

A fourth view is that we await with anticipation the birth of Jesus, in the words of the familiar carol, “the glorious song of hope.” Each year we are reminded again during this season of the possibility of peace on earth and goodwill among humankind, a message borne through the silent night on the wings of angels. *The days are surely coming!*

Jeremiah’s words, read in conjunction with Jesus’ end times teaching from Luke offer a different perspective on what we wait for and on how we wait.

Jeremiah is speaking in 587 BCE, in the midst of a Hebrew nation collapsing. Major elements of its population have already been forced into exile in Babylon. As Jeremiah himself had prophesied, this is what became of the power and glory that was Israel under David and Solomon, a few centuries before. While most of the book of Jeremiah is intended as warning, to prepare Israel for the coming destruction, the passage that we read this morning is from a section called the Book of Consolation. It offers words of hope for the future of God’s chosen people. Even in the midst of political and spiritual collapse (for the two were closely linked in the prophetic perspective), the Holy One could be relied upon to keep promises: a righteous Branch will spring up; justice will be executed; Jerusalem will live in safety. As suggested in the Psalm for today, all the paths of the Holy One are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep God’s covenants and decrees. So even in the midst of political and military collapse accompanied by spiritual disaster, Jeremiah says with hope that *the days are surely coming!*

We turn now from the sixth century BCE to the first century of the Common Era. The central event of Jewish history in that period is arguably the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70. This temple had been begun after the return from the Babylonian exile and continuously enhanced. It was a large and impressive building. Despite various corrupt practices associated with its administration, the Second Temple remained, in the first century CE, the physical and spiritual focal point of faith for the mainstream of the Hebrew tradition. It was destroyed in 70 by the occupying Roman army in retaliation for an attempted revolt by the subjected Jewish people. Now the teaching of Jesus about the end times that is recorded in 21st chapter of Luke's Gospel would have been spoken by him 35 or 40 years before the temple was destroyed, but that terrible event would have been very much in the consciousness of Luke's readers. *The days are surely coming!*

Jesus' teaching about the end time, as exemplified by this passage from Luke, consumes so much of the record of his public verbal ministry that some historians understand Jesus primarily as a Jewish apocalypticist, one of many such teachers of his time, including John the Baptizer, who felt that the state of the world was so terrible that surely God was about to dramatically intervene in history to end it all and to inaugurate a new era of justice and peace, ruled over by a divine/human figure, the "Son of Man." A major crisis occurred in the life of the "Jesus Movement," when, after a couple of generations, these apocalyptic events failed to take place. To this day, we who claim that Jesus of Nazareth is God's Anointed One, the Christ, struggle with this issue. How does Jesus failure to "get it right" historically about the end times square with our faith in him as the Risen Christ?

The answer to this question takes me back forty years to that phrase I learned in seminary: *proleptic* presence, that sense of God's rule and reign as both present now and yet to come in the future. I frankly find this to be a difficult concept. Part of my problem with this notion of *prolepsis*, is my habit of thinking of time as rigidly divided into periods that I like to call past, present and future. It is of course true that my very sanity is dependent upon this scheme. I know both from my own dreams and from the rants of those I call "insane" that these distinctions do not exist in the unconscious, yet that they are an absolute necessity for my conscious life. Without the distinctions, past, present, and future, I, too, would be mad. Nevertheless, thinking about time as a continuum, without reference to them, may give me just a glimpse of the meaning of *proleptic* presence. As T. S. Eliot puts it in *The Four Quartets*,

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.*

So putting these usual categories of time to the side for a moment may show me how, during this Advent season, I can imbibe the body and blood of the crucified and risen Christ, even as I look forward yet again to the celebration Jesus' birth, with its messages of hope and peace. Moreover, I do those things while still living in this present world, this difficult yet wonderful place where I am called to embody that peace and hope, to be part of the Body of Christ. Yes, "the days are surely coming," but those days are also here, and now. Even as we anticipate the celebration of his birth, we affirm, in a paraphrase of the traditional language of the communion liturgy, "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again," Christ has come again, indeed, Christ is coming again, here, now, in my life, in our life together at

Seekers, and in a broken and hurting world.

The days are surely coming!