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A JOURNEY WITH THE APOSTLES

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N. T. Wright

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Advent for Everyone: A Journey with the Apostles

ADVENT
for
EVERYONE

A JOURNEY WITH
THE APOSTLES

A Daily Devotional

N. T.
WRIGHT

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INTRODUCTION



As Christmas has become more exhausting and commercialized, many people find that keeping the preparatory season of Advent helps them to stay focused and recover something of the mystery and excitement that Christmas itself ought to have. Many churches now hold special Advent services. As we approach the darkest time of the year (in the northern hemisphere at least), Advent offers a gleam of light. And hope.

But Advent itself can be puzzling. ‘Advent’ means ‘coming’ or ‘arrival’. The hymns and readings often used during this season seem to be about two quite different things: about waiting for the ‘first coming’, the birth of Jesus, and about waiting for his ‘second coming’ to put everything right in the end. How did these things get muddled up? How can we make wise, prayerful sense out of it all?

The early Christians developed the ‘church’s year’ as a way of telling, learning and reliving the story of Jesus, which stands at the heart of our faith. As they did so, they came to understand that it wasn’t simply a matter of going round and round the same sequence and never getting anywhere. Think of a bicycle wheel; it goes round and round, but it is moving forwards, not standing still. The same circuit around the hub of the wheel becomes part of the forward movement of the bicycle as a whole. So it

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is with the church's year. We go round the circuit: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week and Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost. The traditional Western churches sum all this up on Trinity Sunday, as we learn more deeply who our glorious God really is. But the point of it all is that, in doing this, we are not simply going round and round the same topics and never getting anywhere. We are signing on as part of God's larger project, God's forward purposes, his plans for the whole creation to be renewed, so that (as the prophets said) the earth will be full of the knowledge and glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. In Jesus, God brought heaven and earth together; in his second coming, that joining together will be complete. That is the Advent hope.

So the church's year overlaps with itself. In Advent, we think our way back to the ancient people of God, to the call of Abraham and his family as the start of God's rescue operation for a world in ruins and a human race in chaos. We follow the story of Israel's hope, a hope that refused to die no matter what terrible things happened; a hope that the first Christians believed had become human in the baby Jesus. With that 'first Advent', it was clear that God's rescue operation for humans and the world had been decisively begun but not yet completed. Jesus really did launch God's kingdom 'on earth as in heaven' in his public career, his death and his resurrection. But it was clear, because of the sort of thing this kingdom was, that it would then need to make its way through the humble, self-giving service of Jesus' followers, until the time when Jesus returned to finish the work, to put all things right, to banish evil and death for ever, and to bring heaven and earth completely together.

INTRODUCTION

The 'second Advent', then, overlaps with the first. We celebrate Jesus' first coming, and use that sense of fulfilment to fuel our hope for his second coming and to strengthen us to work for signs of that kingdom in our own day. We live between the first Advent and the second. That is one way of saying what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

The readings in the present book have been chosen to help you ponder and pray through what all this means: what it meant at the time (we always have to go back to that to check our bearings) and what it means today and tomorrow (we always have to come forward to that to stay on track). My hope and prayer is that this book will help individuals, groups and churches to be 'Advent people': people of light in a dark world, people of hope in times and places of despair. People who follow Jesus.

WEEK 1: A TIME FOR THANKSGIVING

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Thankful for God's Grace: 1 Corinthians 1.3–9

³Grace to you and peace from God our father and King Jesus the Lord.

⁴I always thank my God for you, for the grace of God that was given to you in King Jesus. ⁵You were enriched in him in everything, in every kind of speech and knowledge, ⁶just as the messianic message was established among you, ⁷so that you aren't missing out on any spiritual gift as you wait eagerly for our Lord, King Jesus, to be revealed. ⁸He will establish you right through to the end, so that you are blameless on the day of our Lord, King Jesus. ⁹God is faithful! And it is through God that you have been called into the fellowship of his son, King Jesus, our Lord.

We weren't long into the phone call before I noticed something was different. It was the first time I'd spoken to this friend for some weeks and, whichever way the conversation turned, one name kept coming up. She and James had been talking over dinner last night . . . James was hoping to get promotion soon and would be working much closer to where she lived . . . perhaps I knew so-and-so who'd been at school with James? . . . and so on, and so on. There was a warmth, an excitement, and the conclusion was obvious; any minute now, she hoped, James would ask the key question, to which her answer was ready and waiting.

Well, it happened, of course, and they are now married, but my point is to notice how people give themselves away by what they go on talking about, almost (it sometimes

appears) to the point of obsession. It doesn't take long in someone's company, or even during a phone call, before you discover what's really exciting them: what is at the centre of their waking thoughts.

If we had any doubts what Paul was excited about, what was at the centre of his thoughts and intentions, this first paragraph of one of his most varied and lengthy letters would soon put us straight. One name keeps coming up, over and over again: Jesus. The name occurs eight times in these nine verses. Paul couldn't stop talking about Jesus, because without Jesus nothing else he said or did made any sense. And what he wanted the Corinthians to get hold of most of all is what it means to have Jesus at the middle of your story, your life, your thoughts, your imagination. If they could do that, all the other issues that rush to and fro through the letter would sort themselves out.

In particular, he wanted them to have Jesus at the centre of their understanding of the world and of history. Most of the Christians in Corinth had not been Jews but ordinary 'pagans'. They had been Gentiles, believing in various gods and goddesses, but without any idea that history, the story of the world, was *going* anywhere or that their own lives might be part of that forward movement. Again and again Paul wants them to learn this lesson: that they have been caught up into a great movement of the love and power of the one true God, the God of Israel, whose work for the whole world has now been unveiled through the events concerning his son. That's why Jesus is at the centre of the picture.

Look how, with a few deft strokes of the pen, he sketches a picture of the Christians in Corinth so that, at every point, their story is intertwined with Jesus' story. To begin

with, God has set them aside for his own special purposes in King Jesus; that's what 'called to be holy' in verse 2 means. I don't possess very many suits, but there is one I keep for best, which only comes out on the most special of occasions. That's what being 'holy' means, from God's point of view; it means that he has set people aside for special purposes; and the people in question are expected to cooperate with this.

But once they've been set aside as special, they discover that they are part of a large and growing worldwide family, brothers and sisters of everyone who 'calls on the name of our Lord King Jesus'. In fact, 'calling on' his name is the one and only sign of membership in this family, though people in Paul's day and ever since have tried to introduce other signs of membership as well. And the idea of 'calling on his name' links this worldwide family back to the earlier story of Israel, the people who 'called on the name of the Lord' in the sense of the Lord $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$, Israel's God. Right from the start, Paul shows what's going on: in Jesus, Israel's true king, the world's true Lord, Israel's one God has become personally present in the world, summoning all people into his family.

As in most of his letters, Paul follows the opening greeting by telling the Corinthians what he thanks God for when he thinks of them. Notice how he moves from what has happened to them in the past, through the sort of people they are in the present and on to the hope they have for the future, with Jesus at the centre at every stage. God has given them his 'grace' in King Jesus (verse 4). 'Grace' is one of those little words that contains a whole universe of meaning, summing up the fact that God loved them and acted decisively on their behalf even though

WEEK 1: MONDAY

they had done nothing whatever to deserve it, but rather the opposite.

The result of this ‘grace’ is that God’s riches have enriched them (verses 5, 6). They have become a community of learners, growing eagerly in knowledge about God and his new life, able to teach one another, and so strengthening and confirming the original royal proclamation, ‘the messianic message’, that has been made to them.

God has called them in the past, God equips them in the present and God will complete the process in the future. World history, and the story of the Christian life, has a shape, and Jesus is its shaper at every point. There is coming a day – like ‘the day of the Lord’ in the Old Testament, only more so – when the hidden truth about the world will be unveiled; this truth will turn out to be a person, and the person will turn out to be Jesus. That’s why it’s the central Christian badge or sign to ‘call on him’, to pray to the father through him, to know his friendship and love, and to thank him for the wonderful grace he has given us – yesterday, today and for ever.

For Reflection or Discussion

In what ways do you see your church as part of a world-wide family? How does this enable you to ‘call on’ Jesus?

WEEK 1: MONDAY

Thanksgiving in Suffering: 2 Corinthians 1.8–11

8You see, my dear family, we don’t want to keep you in the dark about the suffering we went through in Asia. The load

we had to carry was far too heavy for us; it got to the point where we gave up on life itself. ⁹Yes: deep inside ourselves we received the death sentence. This was to stop us relying on ourselves, and to make us rely on the God who raises the dead. ¹⁰He rescued us from such a great and deadly peril, and he'll do it again; we have placed our hope in him, that he'll do it again! ¹¹But you must co-operate with us through prayer for us, so that when God gives us this gift, answering the prayers of so many, all the more will give thanks because of what's happened to us.

You watch from a distance as a friend walks down the street. You see him turn and go into a house. He strides in cheerfully and purposefully. You wait for a few minutes. Then you see him come out again – only now you see, to your horror, that he is limping, staggering along, with bruises on his face and blood trickling from one arm. You are filled with pity and sympathy, but also with puzzlement: *What on earth happened in that house?*

The historian, particularly the ancient historian, is often in the position of the puzzled spectator. We may have evidence about an early phase of someone's career and then again a later phase, but what happened in between is often hidden from us. So it is with Paul. He has gone into the house, striding cheerfully along; that is how he appears to us in 1 Corinthians. Now, in 2 Corinthians, we see him emerge again, battered and bruised. Even his style of writing seems to have changed. But we don't know what happened inside.

Nor does he tell us. Like many people in the ancient world, he was more interested in what illness or suffering *meant* than in giving us a detailed account of his symptoms. Most of what we know is in these verses; we can

glean a little from things he says later in the letter, but it doesn't amount to much. He simply refers to 'the suffering we went through in Asia' (the Roman province of 'Asia' was roughly the western half of modern Turkey, with Ephesus in the middle of its west coast; Ephesus was where Paul was staying when he wrote 1 Corinthians). What had happened?

Acts doesn't help at this point, either. Perhaps, if Paul was imprisoned and ill-treated in Ephesus – as seems likely – the author of Acts was anxious not to draw too much attention to it. He has Paul getting into enough trouble as it is. But the riot in the theatre in Ephesus, which Acts describes in chapter 19, may have been part of it. In that passage, things are quietened down by the city officials. But people had woken up to the fact that if the message Paul was announcing was to catch on, their businesses would suffer; so would their civic pride in the great temple of Diana. And the opposition may well have continued in new and nastier ways, leaving Paul feeling, as he says here, that he's received the sentence of death.

In fact, his description sounds much like what we would call a nervous breakdown. The load had become too heavy; all his natural human resources of energy and strength were worn down to nothing. It's bad enough to hear a magistrate declare that you are sentenced to death; it's far worse when a voice deep inside yourself tells you that you might as well give up and die. That is the point Paul had reached, the point where the night had become totally dark and all hope of dawn had disappeared.

Does that mean he'd been relying on his own resources up to that point? That seems strange for someone who

could write, in the previous letter, about his work being done not by his own efforts, but by God's grace (1 Corinthians 15.10). But maybe, beneath this conscious sense of God's help and grace, there was still more that Paul had to learn about the meaning of the resurrection – the very thing that he had made the climax of the earlier letter (chapter 15)! Here he says it plainly: the fact that he came to the point where he despaired of life itself was somehow intended – intended by God, he must mean – to make him rely on 'the God who raises the dead'. This old Jewish belief in the life-giving God, the God whose power created the world and will recreate it, came home freshly to Paul as he found himself stripped of all other resources.

Paul begins his letter by telling them this much, not simply in order to gain sympathy, though no doubt that is part of it, but for two other reasons as well, one which he mentions and one he doesn't. The one he mentions is that he wants them to be bound to him all the more tightly in a fellowship of prayer. When two people or communities pray seriously for one another, a bond is set up between them that transforms their relationship when they meet again. In addition, Paul sees in verse 11 that something else happens, which is what he is really interested in: when lots of people are praying for something and God then grants it, the thanksgiving is increased.

For Paul, when human beings give thanks to God, something at the heart of the universe comes back into proper shape. Humans thanking the creator for his goodness are a symptom of the way the world was meant to be, a sign that one day it really will be like that. And such signs are themselves powerful in helping forward

WEEK 1: TUESDAY

the work of the gospel through which the great day will come.

For Reflection or Discussion

Have you ever reached the point when you felt like giving up? How in those circumstances did you find your way back to God?

WEEK 1: TUESDAY

Grace, Generosity and Gratitude: 2 Corinthians 9.6–15

⁶This is what I mean: someone who sows sparingly will reap sparingly as well. Someone who sows generously will reap generously. ⁷Everyone should do as they have determined in their heart, not in a gloomy spirit or simply because they have to, since ‘God loves a cheerful giver’. ⁸And God is well able to lavish all his grace upon you, so that in every matter and in every way you will have enough of everything, and may be lavish in all your own good works, ⁹just as the Bible says:

They spread their favours wide, they gave to the poor,
Their righteousness endures for ever.

¹⁰The one who supplies ‘seed to be sown and bread to eat’ will supply and increase your seed, and multiply the yield of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way in all single-hearted goodness, which is working through us to produce thanksgiving to God. ¹²The service of this ministry will not only supply what God’s people so badly need, but it will also overflow with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³Through meeting the test of this service you will glorify God in two ways: first, because your confession of faith in

the Messiah's gospel has brought you into proper order, and second, because you have entered into genuine and sincere partnership with them and with everyone. ¹⁴What's more, they will then pray for you and long for you because of the surpassing grace God has given to you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his gift, the gift we can never fully describe!

Imagine trying to pack an umbrella into a cardboard tube. If you try putting the handle in first it will be difficult. Even if the handle is straight, you will find that the metal tips of the umbrella's struts get caught on the edge of the tube as you struggle to push it in. You may eventually succeed, but you are likely to tear the umbrella, or perhaps the cardboard, in the attempt. The answer, of course, is to turn the umbrella round so that the pointed end goes in first. Then, even if the umbrella isn't folded up properly, you will find that it goes in easily enough.

Something similar happens when people try to persuade others into a course of action that they may find difficult or challenging. Going on telling people to do something they don't particularly want to do is like pushing an umbrella into a tube the wrong way round. You may succeed; if you're a forceful enough character, people may eventually do what you want. But they won't enjoy it and you may damage some relationships on the way. The trick is to turn people's minds and imaginations around so that what seemed forced, awkward and unnatural now seems the most natural thing of all.

Paul rounds off his careful and cautious appeal about the collection by standing back from the details of travel plans and other arrangements and outlining the world-view within which generous giving of the sort he has in

mind no longer seems awkward or peculiar. It would be easy to read this passage as simply a list of wise maxims, shrewd and pithy sayings about human generosity and God's abundant goodness; but, although the passage does have that flavour, there is more to it than that. It may be just a sketch, but it's a sketch of nothing less than the whole picture of what it means to be God's people. Give people a few slogans, and you may end up simply trying to force them to do things they don't want to. Turn their minds around so that they see everything – God, the world, the church, themselves – in a different light, and the behaviour may come naturally.

As always, Paul's vision of God's people is firmly rooted in the Bible. And whenever Paul quotes a passage of the Bible, even four or five words, it's worth looking at the original passage, often the entire chapter or paragraph from which the quotation is taken, and seeing what its overall sense is. Here we have three passages, each one of which contributes more than meets the eye to what he is saying, and that together help him to construct a larger picture of who God's people are, what their goal in life should be and how generosity in giving plays a vital part in it all.

The first passage he quotes is from a verse in Proverbs that occurs in the Greek translation of Proverbs 22.9: 'God blesses a cheerful giver.' Paul and his churches would normally have read the Bible in Greek and the passage he quotes would have been part of that Bible, even though (for reasons that are now difficult to fathom) it isn't in the Hebrew texts and, in consequence, isn't in the English and other translations we know today. But what's more important is that much of Proverbs 22 as a whole is about riches and poverty, which has of course

been Paul's subject now for two chapters of this letter. 'A good name', Proverbs 22 begins, 'is to be chosen instead of great riches, and grace is better than silver and gold.' Paul has been talking about 'grace' a good deal in these chapters and the 'grace' in question often consists precisely in living for the good name of being God's people rather than hanging on for dear life to silver and gold. Several subsequent verses give instruction about riches. Verse 8 speaks of people who 'sow' wickedness and 'reap' evil, while verse 9 speaks of those who take pity on the poor being themselves supplied with food. Paul is, as often, calling to mind an entire passage, not just a single saying, since he starts his own passage by talking about people 'sowing' in a meagre way or a generous way; and the word he uses for 'generously' is the same word used in Proverbs ('blesses') for what God will do to a cheerful giver. Proverbs gives a reasonably complete portrait of a wise and God-fearing person who knows how to be generous with money. Paul wants the Corinthians to see this as a portrait of themselves.

The second passage he quotes from is Psalm 112.9, speaking again of the person who scatters blessing to the poor. Such a person, says the Psalm, has a 'righteousness' that lasts for ever. This word 'righteousness' is a puzzle to many today, since it makes people think of that unpleasant quality, 'self-righteousness'. But it's hard to know what other word to use. In the Psalms and elsewhere in the Old Testament, it regularly refers on the one hand to God's own faithfulness to the promises he made to his people, and on the other to the behaviour by which God's people demonstrate their gratitude to God for this faithfulness. In the case of the present Psalm, the whole

poem is a celebration of those who fear and trust the Lord, and in particular of their generosity and merciful behaviour towards their neighbours, especially the poor. Once again, Paul is inviting the Corinthians to step inside the biblical portrait and discover a whole new identity, not simply to do something strange because he tells them to.

But the real climax comes in the third passage. God, says Paul, provides 'seed for the sower and bread to eat', quoting Isaiah 55.10. Isaiah 55 is the glorious invitation to all and sundry to come and feast on God's rich bounty, because God is making a new creation in which everything will be renewed. This new creation, achieved through the death and resurrection of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53, is based on the covenant renewal celebrated in Isaiah 54 and will come about because God will 'sow' his Word in the same way that he sends rain and snow to provide seed-corn and bread.

What Paul is urging the Corinthians to do is think of themselves, as it were, this way round and discover that, if they realize they are characters in the great drama which is going forward, then the generosity he is urging will come naturally. In the normal and healthy Christian life, everything proceeds from God's generosity, and everything returns to God in thanksgiving. Grace, generosity and gratitude: these are not optional extras of Christian living, but are the very heart of it all.

For Reflection or Discussion

Are you a cheerful giver? How do you think Paul's words might help you give more generously?

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