

PROPER PREFACES FOR AN EXPANDED ADVENT SEASON

by

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The **Revised Common Lectionary (RCL)** readings for the four Sundays following All Saints' Day¹ (November 1) are focused on eschatology. Particular distributions of this general subject may vary among kingdom or reign of God, *parousia*, coming again, end times, consummation, Day of God, last judgment or last day, and so on. In any case, particular emphases reflect an overall intense yearning and hope for the fulfillment of the implications of Jesus Christ's resurrection for the whole creation and every creature.

In an expanded Advent, over the three-year rota, the Liturgy of the Word for these Sundays, then, provides for every new liturgical year a setting grounded in and energized by God's reign of justice and peace. The strength of each year's twelve readings (with their attendant psalms) invites more than simply observing a repeated yearly round from the seasons of Incarnation (Christmas & Epiphany/Ordinary Time) through Lent & the Great Fifty Days of Easter to Pentecost (and the season following it, Ordinary Time again). By virtue of Advent's eschatological emphasis, there is an implied, if not explicit, call for a further deepening of the annual liturgical pilgrimage through the year.

Following the initial four-week eschatological emphasis, however, the **RCL** readings for the next three Sundays begin ever-so-slightly to shift their focus toward the theme of incarnation.² In this regard, they provide an anticipation of the feast and season of Christmas only in the last two weeks of an expanded Advent (formerly comprising fully three-fourths of the truncated four-week season).

This movement in the Liturgy of the Word from Advent's primary focus (the eternal context-setting pole of eschatology) to its secondary pole (focus on the historical development of salvation) suggests that a similar recognition of movement might also be realized in the Liturgy

¹ Although it is not universally observed, All Saints Day with its emphasis on the communion of all the holy ones of God is not simply the culmination of the *sanctorale* (annual cycle of commemorations of notable persons on their "birthday in eternity"), but also All Saints represents the end of the ecclesiastical year. Cf., *précis* of Jill Burnett Comings, "Culmination in the *Communio Sanctorum*: Celebrating the Feast of All Saints as Completion of the Liturgical Year," *Proceedings 2010* (North American Academy of Liturgy), p. 36.

² This shift is demonstrated in an interesting manner, for instance, in contrasting the First and Gospel readings of the present Advent 2 (Advent 5 new/old style), Year A. For Christian listeners, Isaiah 11:1 - 10 begins with that grand harbinger of incarnation "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse" (from which, of course, the Advent "O" antiphon *Radix Jesse* is drawn). By contrast, the Gospel lection, Matthew 3:1 - 12, is centered on the proclamation of John the Baptist. That proclamation, again from a Christian point-of-view, at once represents in the person of John a culmination of all the Hebrew prophets in regard to a judgment on the orders of this world and the coming reign of God embodied in the Christ that John identifies. In short the transition from the primary to the secondary pole of the Advent season occurs during the Sunday liturgy itself, especially in the tension found in the future vision of the First Reading as it is pulled from the past into the present (both John the Baptist's and ours) by the Gospel lection as it echoes the prophets.

of the Table/Holy Communion. One way of accomplishing this is to provide two proper prefaces for Great Thanksgivings in the season of Advent. The following are congruent with the emphases noted.³ They come between the *Sursum corda* (“Lift up your hearts...”) and the *Sanctus* (“Holy, Holy, Holy Lord...”).

A Proper Preface for Advent I - IV

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

Because in Jesus Christ you established your reign of righteousness and peace, giving us partnership in its manifestation and hope for its fulfillment.

Therefore, &c.

A Proper Preface for Advent V - VII

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

Because in your Son, Jesus Christ, you came among us in great humility that the whole human family created in your image might be redeemed from all ills and live in peace by the power of your love.

Therefore, &c.

³ The Episcopal Church’s *Book of Common Prayer 1979*, in fact, provides precedent for more than one proper preface to a season. Two are provided for Lent, the first for the early weeks focused on repentance and the second on weeks after the mid-point focused on preparation for celebrating the Paschal Mystery. Yet a third proper preface is provided for Holy Week itself.