

Happy New Year!

Every year I like to remind folks that the first Sunday of Advent is the first day of our liturgical new year. Don't ask me why. It's just something I like to do. Maybe it's just my geeky little way of being just a little counter-cultural.

But, this year I've come across another question I'm glad no one has asked me. Really, until this last week, it just didn't even occur to me to wonder why 1st Advent should be the start of the Christian New Year.

I've wracked my brain over everything I learned in seminary. I've even done several Google searches. All for nothing. I have no idea why First Advent should begin the new Christian year.

After all, what does it actual mark the beginning of? Sure, it's time well spent in preparing ourselves for Christ's Second Coming and also preparing ourselves to remember Christ's birth. But, when I think of a day in the Church year when an actual new beginning is made, well of course I think about Easter.

Maybe it's just me, but it really seems that a New Year's Day should be marked by something new - a new day, or even an anniversary of some very special day. 1st Advent doesn't commemorate anything in particular. It's almost as if we're beginning something before the actual beginning!

Or maybe, what's most likely the case, I'm just over-thinking it all a bit too much. You see, there are some elements of Advent that do make it reasonable that we should begin our new year.

First of all, the word itself - Advent - connects to new beginnings. You see, Advent comes from the latin word for a very important Greek word. The original Greek word that lies behind our word Advent is the word Parousia. I hope that some of you are aware that Parousia is a crucially

important word for the Christian faith. You see, Parousia is precisely the word that refers to Christ's second coming, the time when God's justice will finally set the world right.

Parousia. Beautiful word. Beautiful vision of God's plan for God's creation.

To help us understand the importance of Parousia, I need to rely upon an extended quote from one of my favorite theologians and one of my favorite books of his. In *Surprised by Hope*, former Bishop of Durham, England, Tom Wright provides a wonderfully vivid explanation of parousia (pp. 128-132):

"People often assume that the early church used parousia simply to mean "the second coming of Jesus" and that by this event they all envisaged, in a quite literal fashion, the scenario of 1 Thessalonians 4 - Jesus coming down on a cloud and people flying upward to meet him. Neither of these assumptions is in fact correct.

"The word parousia had two lively meanings in non-Christian discourse at the time. Both of these seem to have influenced it in its Christian meaning.

"The first meaning was the mysterious presence of a god or divinity, *particularly* when the power of this god was revealed in *healing*. People would suddenly be aware of a supernatural and powerful presence, and the obvious word for this was parousia. ...God's powerful, saving presence is revealed in *action*, for instance when Israel under King Hezekiah was miraculously defended against the Assyrians.

"The second meaning emerges when a person of high rank makes a visit to a subject state, particularly when a king or emperor visits a colony or province. The word for such a visit is "royal presence" - in Greek, parousia. In neither setting, we note, obviously but importantly, is there the slightest suggestion of anybody flying around on a cloud. Nor is there any hint of the imminent collapse or destruction of the space-time universe.

"Now suppose ... the early church wanted to say two things. Suppose they wanted to say, first, that the Jesus they worshipped was

near in spirit but absent in body *but* that one day he would be present in body and that then the whole world, themselves included, would know the sudden transforming power of that presence. A natural word to use for this would be parousia.

"At the same time, suppose they wanted to say that the Jesus who had been raised from the dead and exalted to God's right hand was the rightful Lord of the world, the true Emperor before whom all other emperors would shake in their shoes and bow their knees in fear and wonder. And suppose they wanted to say that, just as Caesar might one day visit a colony like Phillipi or Corinth (the normally absent but ruling emperor appearing and ruling in person), so the absent but ruling Lord of the world would one day appear and rule in person within this world, with all the consequences that would result. Again, the natural word to use for this would be parousia. Especially since early Christians were keen to say that Jesus was the true Lord and that Caesar was a sham.

Now, Bishop Wright has a lot more really wonderful things to say in this book and his other books, but I wonder if what we've just read also helps us understand why first Advent would be the beginning of the new year. You see, a crucially important point of an emperor visiting a colony is that the people would go out to meet the emperor before he actually got to the colony.

Bishop Wright says, "It would have been disrespectful to have him actually arrive at the gates as though his subjects couldn't be bothered to greet him properly. When they met him, ...they would escort him royally into the city or colony itself. ...That is, escort him back to the place where they have come from" , to the place where he is rightfully the king of.

And so, I guess, in a way it does make sense that we begin our new year with first Advent. The new year *has to* begin before the day we celebrate his birth and second coming. It *has to* begin before the actual special day because we have to go out and meet him and properly escort him into his kingdom.

What's important, of course, is that we actually make a real beginning of it. What's important is that this "Season of preparation" is something so much more than merely "preparation", but an actual preparing and repairing of things - that it is an actual going out to meet our Lord. To go out and meet him and welcome him into his rightful domain - our hearts, our church, our world.

Or perhaps we should use an entirely different word; perhaps the word "anticipation" would be better. You may have noticed, but the whole world seems to be filled with eager anticipation of Christmas. Of course, there's many reasons for this frenzy - many of the reasons are pretty bad, but some of them are very, very good.

From time to time it seems we really can learn a lot about faith by watching our kids - especially the little ones. And so it is that I'd like to suggest, after watching my kids already beginning to go a little crazy for Christmas that instead of "preparation" we refer to this season of Advent as an "anticipation" of Jesus' return.

Let us be filled with anticipation for Jesus to return, just as our kids (as well as some of us grownups!) are filled with an almost rabid anticipation for Christmas morning.

Anticipation. Anticipation in all its glory. Eagerness. Single-mindedness. Focused attention. Let us have all those things in anticipation of God's justice in the world.

Happy New Year! Let us truly go out to welcome our Lord! Amen.