

There's a strain of thinking in our present-day culture, which comes out in films or television drama and sometimes in the "ironic" humour of modern comedians and chat show pundits, which sees human nature as selfish, weak-willed, hardly any more than a collection of appetites which dictate our attitudes and behaviour.

It's a type of fatalism. Human beings, the argument goes, are powerless to effect any radical change or improvement in their moral character. Some individuals even seem to think they should be congratulated for their "ruthless honesty" because they own up candidly to their fundamental selfishness. To believe that human beings are anything else, they imply, is to fall into illusion and self-deception.

Of course these are rationalisations and excuses. Faced with our own personal sinfulness and with the innumerable forms of exploitation and suffering in the world, it's easy to take refuge in pseudo-profundities about human nature being hopelessly corrupt. These kinds of statement absolve us from any sense of responsibility and relieve us from the practical task of doing something about these problems. They justify our numbness.

The gospel, on the other hand, takes issue with every kind of defeatist and fatalistic tendency. The root supposition of Jesus' message is: we can aim higher. We are more than the sum of our appetites. Holiness is possible. We're not obliged to just accept the forces of cruelty, selfishness and oppression, within ourselves or in the world around us. The alternative is that we can turn to God and open ourselves to his transforming grace.

The symbolism of Advent is the symbolism of preparing ourselves for the imminent arrival of God: not only his entry into human history, commemorated at Christmas, but also the impact he would have on our lives now, if we made ready to welcome him or indeed, in the case of many of us, reawakened our desire for God which we've managed to bury under a pile of other preoccupations.

As Christ says, when God comes he must not find us asleep! This is what the season of Advent encourages us to think about, and act upon.

The Advent Collect

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and to put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility;
that on the last day,
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.