



# Boston Catholic Journal

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## ADVENT: The Lengthening Shadow Under the Son

Notum fac mihi, Dómine, finem meum, et númerum  
diérum meórum quis est, ut sciam quid desit mihi.



O Lord, make me know my end. And what is the  
number of my days: that I may know what is wanting  
to me.

Psalm 38.5

**A**dvent ... the summons to the wood of the Cradle and the wood of the Cross --- and in this time, in this place, both are empty, the Cradle and the Cross. The Baby Jesus is yet to be born and the Man Jesus is yet to be crucified.

In this sense it is a time of emptiness --- not so much fraught with anticipation as with a deeply subdued *hope* of things to be. It is a time of darkness that verges on impending Light, a time of indistinct shadows in a twilight pervading the universe and the deepest recesses of the soul. In our hope we perceive our poverty and our misery --- and we seek our deliverance. We are wanting.

Whether we turn to the Son, or away from Him, the shadow remains and nothing we do can diminish its length or alter its direction. Advent is a time for us to reflect on our end in light of His beginning, on our own death in light of His birth. We number our days ... but to disordered ends. We behold dissolution, and we despair ... instead of grasping the reality of the Resurrection, and rejoicing.

Why, we ask ourselves, do our own hearts hesitate before every acclamation of joy in this season? Why is the joy never more than penultimate; why does it not attain to exultation within us?

Why in this Season of Coming do we find it far, far more redolent of leaving, of things passing, of things that were and are no more, and things that now are and that will soon no longer be; a season of generations past, and a generation soon to pass. We are invited, paradoxically, to rejoice in a coming that ineluctably heralds our own leaving ...

Why is this? Symbols of joy abound, but emptiness resounds within us. As the years pass we become increasingly aware of the discordance, the disproportion we find between the invitations to rejoice and a growing despair within us. We are called to rejoice, and cannot. Why does Advent provoke such sadness within us?

We grow sad --- and not joyful --- because we have lost sight of the meaning of Advent: that our lasting home is in Heaven and that Jesus *came* to bring us there. He did not come to make our home here (although we try very hard, and always fail, to make it so), He did not come to make this world ours. "They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world." (St. John 17.16)

Failing to grasp this, we grow either despondent or cynical. In either case we dismiss the possibility of ever reconciling appearances to realities, the joy to the sadness, the coming to the leaving.

Despair and cynicism. Both are deficient in knowledge and as a consequence both are defective in the virtue of Hope --- each in a different way. Neither sufficiently understands the meaning of Advent. Despair binds us to what we must relinquish, and cynicism relinquishes what binds us to hope. The Cradle has lost its continuity to the Cross.

## **The Cradle and the Cross**

The Cradle and the Cross --- we have already read the entire narrative, and know the end --- and if we believe, we know that the end is our beginning. He was not born to remain in the world ... and neither were we. But we have forgotten this. We cling to the world through memories that bind us to it; we are tethered to things past that will never be again, people, places, events, that we can never recapture but only recall ... and we are blinded by our tears.

The few that have been genuinely happy have always been fleet, but with broad strokes of narrow moments we color our past, beholding an endless field of uncut grass and nodding

flowers unmingled with thistles and knowing nothing of thorns; in the distance we see the towering Cedars but no sad Cypress; like children we paint a sky of unbroken blue and dazzling sunlight impervious to cloud or the veil of cold rain.

We are dreamers. God be praised, because the dream is the pledge of something real ... but not here.

Advent, Christmas ... times of such joy, redolent of such sorrow ... in our hearts we know that in a breath they will pass as ever they have passed, leaving us looking wistfully back through yet another window of another year. We look back ... when Advent calls us too look forward!

Advent is not a season of what was, but of what will be --- what will be in the Cradle and on the Cross, and through that Cradle, through that Cross, what will be everlastingly! *Finem respice!* Look to the end! Not here. Not now. Not in this place of passing; not sorrowfully to what has been and cannot remain, but joyfully to what will be ... and remain forever!

Turn your face to the Son in the Cradle and on the Cross --- Who has promised you that, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered in to the heart of man, what God has prepared for those who love Him."

We have cause to rejoice. He has come to tells us so.



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