Advent Reflection for the First Sunday of Advent



Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI)

Stepping Out of the Night

Taken from *Seek That Which Is Above*, pp. 23–27

What is Advent? Many answers can be given. We can grumble and say that it is nothing but a pretext for hectic activity and commercialism, prettified with sentimental clichés in which people stopped believing ages ago. In many cases this may be true, but it is not the whole picture.

We can say the reverse, that Advent is a time when, in the midst of an unbelieving world, something of the luminous quality of this lost faith is still perceptible, like a visual echo. Just as stars are visible long after they have become extinct, since their erstwhile light is still on its way to us, so this mystery frequently offers some warmth and hope even to those who are no longer able to believe in it.

We can also say that Advent is a time when a kindness that is otherwise almost entirely forgotten is mobilized; namely, the willingness to think of others and give them a token of kindness. Finally we can say that Advent is a time when old customs live again, for instance, in the singing of carols that takes place all over the country. In the melodies and the words of these carols, something of the simplicity, imagination and glad strength of the faith of our forefathers makes itself heard in our age, bringing consolation and encouraging us perhaps to have another go at that faith which could make people so glad in such hard times.

This latter kind of experience of Advent brings us quite close to what the Christian tradition has in mind with this season. It has expressed its view of Advent in the Bible texts that it took as the season's signposts. I will mention just one of them, a few verses from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. There he says, "… it is full time now for you to wake from sleep … the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light, let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in

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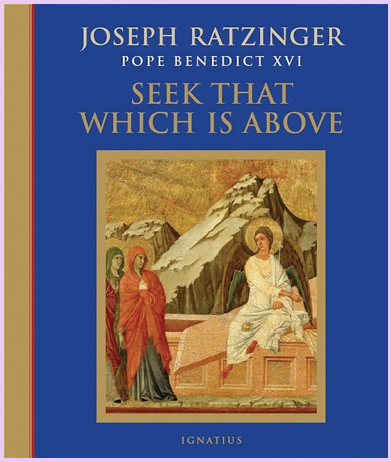
quarrelling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ …" (Rom 13:11–14). So Advent means getting up, being awake, emerging out of sleep and darkness.

There are many people, of course, who urge us to get up and awake; "Germany, awake!" was the cry of those who, years ago, were bent on deluding the nation; and today too there are awakenings and uprisings that lead further into darkness instead of out of it. What does Paul mean? He puts very clearly what he means by "night" by speaking of "revelling and drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarrelling and jealousy". For Paul, nocturnal revelling with all that goes with it stands for the dark side of human nature, man's being "asleep". For him it becomes a symbol of the pagan world as such, submerged in material things, held fast in the darkness that prevails where there is no truth and that, despite all its decibels and hectic activity, is asleep, because it lives unaware of genuine reality, of the real human vocation.

Nocturnal orgies as the image of a world in ruin—are we not appalled to see how aptly Paul characterizes our present times, which are returning to paganism? For us, "rising from sleep" means arising from conformity with the world and with the times and having the courage to believe and to shake off the dream that causes us to bypass our true vocation and our best possibilities. Perhaps the Advent hymns we hear every year may be lights to us, indicating our path, making us look up and recognize that there are greater promises than those of money, power and pleasure. Being awake for God and for other people—that is the kind of "waking" that Advent has in mind, the wakefulness that discovers the light and brightens the world.

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