

Advent 1

I once spent a happy summer holiday as the Chaplain of Taormina in Sicily. Sicily has an extraordinary sense of the past as **present**. We know that much Christian practice, especially the church calendar, was made over from existing pagan and secular celebrations, which is appropriate because of the incarnation. If God was prepared to take human form, then we may be reassured that all human activity belongs to God; the Bible teaches us that creation is **good** and humanity is sanctified by God's action in us.

In Sicily, home to so many succeeding civilisations, you can see and touch the past everywhere. In Syracuse the Cathedral is very obviously a Greek temple with walls added between the Doric columns. Deep in the dry centre of the island ancient sites of the mother-goddess Demeter have been made over into churches honouring the mother of Christ. Even in the resort town of Taormina there were plenty of examples of the past breaking through into present life, from the Roman amphitheatre with its spectacular backdrop of Mt Etna playing host to a concert conducted by Ennio Morricone, to the feast of St Pancrazio which I have only properly understood with Advent in view.

San Pancrazio (not the same St Pancras as our almost-neighbour), was a 1st century martyr of Taormina, where some of his relics remain. The little ancient church dedicated to him opens only on his feast day. So it was that, on 9 July 1994, I witnessed a procession (with a band, playing Sicilian opera tunes) from the *Duomo* to the church of San Pancrazio. The ancient retired Archpriest and his housekeeper (let the reader understand), joined the procession in a Fiat 500; the present Archpriest (and his housekeeper) led the procession bearing a life-size bust of the saint in which the relics were housed. When we reached San Pancrazio's church, a little wooden railway had been built, sloping up from the church door to a throne above the altar. The reliquary was placed on a cart and the men of the town took it in turns to pull on ropes, with a great pantomime of straining and panting, to hoist the saint up to his throne, where the Archpriest (*without* his housekeeper) placed him; cue more opera music **and** fireworks.

This was all great fun, as one would expect in a Sicilian summer, but I only realised later that this was another Christianisation, relevant to our celebration today. Pagans (and, probably, the ancestors of Judaism) observed a festival of the divinity coming to dwell in his temple at a certain time each year.

The Latin name of this feast was *adventus* – the arrival of the god (in Greek παρουσία: the word for Christ's return in the New Testament). The temple, usually closed, would be opened and a statue of the divinity would be solemnly brought into the main sanctuary. The *adventus* was a celebration of presence re-emphasised. Once the cult of the emperor spread, his state visits were also known as an *adventus* and a festival of his *adventus* was kept each year in the places which he had visited. This was what they were doing with the bust of San Pancrazio.

What better word than *adventus* for the visit of the Son of God to earth in the Temple of his flesh? Christians used it to emphasise the *true* coming of divinity into the world. Preparing for Christmas (originally the winter solstice feast of the birth of *sol invictus*, the unvanquished Sun, the returning of the year towards light), this *adventus* was originally a month-long celebration of the coming of God among us. As our calendar developed, the fullness of the Christmas season was understood to conclude with a second *adventus*, the coming of the child Jesus into the Jerusalem Temple (Candlemas).

As Lent was developed as a preparation for the greatest feast, Easter, so Advent began to be treated like a lesser Lent: a gloomy preparation for the birthday – odd when you think about it – rather than a joyful celebration of it. Here's why we shouldn't despise the world's too-early Christmas celebrations: if we *join in*, we can reclaim the feast; we can do what our Christian ancestors did to their secular festivals.

So, although we keep these four weeks in purple it isn't supposed to be a time of introspective gloom; it's supposed to be a time of rejoicing and wakefulness, as the gospel recommends. The purple, in the darkest month of the year turns to the white and gold of Christmas as we celebrate the first spark of the lengthening days, lit by Christ, the new unvanquished Sun.

This reminds me of the Easter Vigil, when we celebrate the Christian Passover, the Lord's passage from death to life, his re-birth, if you like, and ours too. At the Vigil one of the first ceremonies is the blessing of the Paschal candle: that candle which stands in the Sanctuary in Eastertide and there by the font for the rest of the year (to remind us that baptism unites us to the risen Christ; birth and rebirth). In the blessing of the candle these ancient words are used:

Christ yesterday and today
the beginning and the end
Alpha and Omega

all time belongs to him,
*and all the ages;
to him be glory and power,
through every age and for ever. Amen.*

‘All time belongs to him’: that’s what our calendar and seasons are all about; that is the message of our Christian New Year, today. He is not past but **present**; even the darkness of winter, even in pandemic and lockdown, we are to be **awake** to the light, to signs of his presence with us, here at the altar, and all around us in his world. We are all, in the words of today’s gospel, doorkeepers to the Temple of the Lord. Doorkeepers are to be alert to whatever is happening around them, not focussed on themselves to the exclusion of others; their task is to welcome the Master of the house and to make sure his guests can get in to meet him. That is our first task as members of this and every Christian church.

‘And what I say to you I say to all’: ‘keep awake!’

‘All time belongs to him’