

ARCHIVES ADVENT

INNER VIEWS

What's happening this Advent?

There's a struggle going on in the church today. You may feel it more than you are able to put a finger on exactly what is happening. This is because its roots lie buried deeply within two approaches to who Jesus is as the Incarnate Son of God. These approaches also differ in their understanding of God the Father as revealed in the life of Jesus. These differing approaches play themselves out most concretely in the changes made in the way we celebrate our Sunday mass. These approaches are often considered antagonistic and yet I believe that they are complimentary, they need each other for balance.

There is no way that I can give either side of the issue its just dues. They come from thousands of years of historical development, deeply penetrating thinkers and reactions to the cultural conditions of their times. Simply put, the Roman institutional dimension of our church seems to want to return to a way of relating to God that existed before Vatican Council II – close to 50 years ago. This plays itself out in the mass as an attempt to enhance the priest's role by setting him apart from the people's role. In this "cultic" priesthood the priest is envisioned as the "go-between" between God and people. We come to God through the priest's activity because Jesus is the divine Son who acts as our "go-between." In other words the priest is needed to connect us to God.

You'll notice this emphasis played out in the mass. More philosophical language, as seen in words like "consubstantial" are used. But even more telling is the attempt to keep lay people at a distance from the altar – which is the priest's place and privilege.

This had changed dramatically after Vatican II. At that time the priest was envisioned as sharing a "ministerial priesthood" with the people. His role was to lead the people in "full and active participation" in the mass. People were encouraged to place the gifts of bread and wine on the altar as a sign of their active participation. The Eucharistic ministers had an active role in preparing the bread and wine and later in the Mass they cleared the sacred vessels from the altar. In the new order of things these are considered duties of the ordained priest.

You'll also notice a greater emphasis on our sinfulness in the new translation of the prayers. We are to be reminded how far we are from the ideal of Jesus as the divine -human Son and of our need for salvation. These are important to our faith, it's a matter of emphasis. All of this emphasizes the divinity of Jesus and the special role of the priest. The hope is that in doing this many people will be drawn back to the mystery of the mass and young men will be attracted to a priestly vocation. Certainly some people will relate to this more than others. The problem happens when this becomes a criteria by which we judge one another's "orthodoxy," because it separates us, the "sheep from the goats" depending on who is making the judgment.

Much of this is a reaction to the last 50 years in which the human dimension of Jesus was more fully explored. One of the roles of the institutional church is to keep a balance between the human and divine dimensions of Jesus. Since the middle ages there has been an overemphasis on the divinity of Jesus, which kept him at a distance from us. Who could possibly live up to the divine qualities of the totally perfect Son of God? The emphasis on his divinity excused us from

ARCHIVES ADVENT

living like him – after all “we’re just humans.” This is why the emphasis during the Advent Season was focused on waiting for the divine child to come. This created a totally sentimental relationship to Jesus which reduced him to being a cute and cuddly child. We needed some way to feel that we could relate. The child Jesus is far more approachable than the totally divine adult who stands in harsh judgment of our weaknesses. Unfortunately this missed the point of the Gospel portrayal of Jesus.

This approach was cemented into place by a theology that was based on the best philosophy available at its time. This strictly philosophical and intellectual approach to understanding Jesus and his message laid out an exquisitely complete and comprehensive approach that intellectually answered all possible questions. You can see why this would be incredibly attractive to some personalities and to the institutional church. If you like a purely intellectual and philosophical approach this is a little bit of heaven.

However this approach does not do justice to Jesus’ humanity and to the spiritual needs and development and questions of our modern culture. A more fully integrated approach emphasizes our shared divinity, the sacredness of being human as the foundation of our relationships to Jesus and celebration of this relationship in the Mass...

For thousands of years the biblical foundation of our faith has been filtered through the lens of the prevailing philosophy, which creates a dualistic approach which separates us from Jesus and the Father. According to this idea, God is a person existing for himself, outside of the world. He has created the world as an existence separate from himself and rules it from outside. God is conceived as being purely spiritual, ideal and abstractly perfect. This conceptualization is meant to save us from pantheism.

Contemplative spirituality, however, finds its foundation in an experience of unity where separation between God and the world disappears. This approach does not equate us with God as pantheism does but it envisions us as an expression of God’s love in human flesh and blood. This has the added advantage of being closer to the biblical revelation that God is manifest in the ordinary, in the actual, in the daily, in the now, in the concrete incarnations of life. This is why Jesus stands religion on its head. And it is made concretely real in the theological concept of “Real Presence.” Real Presence is physical bread and intoxicating wine. “Body of Christ” we say as we give the consecrated bread. The divine Son continues on this earth in earthly expression. We bear the mystery of God as our flesh and blood.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - Stillpoint / PATHWAYS

INNER VIEWS

Advent, the time of Joyful Expectation.

"Hail to you, full of grace. The Lord is with you."

ARCHIVES ADVENT

Advent is not simply a season to await the coming of Christmas, of the biggest birthday part of the year. We are not rehearsing for a commemoration, nor are we looking back in nostalgia. Rather we look back in faith so that we can look forward in hope. Christmas this year will be as big as our hopes, and as real as our willingness to let those hope take flesh in our lives. This is why the exhortation to “Rejoice” is so necessary and practical at this moment. And this is why Elizabeth's greeting to Mary is reflective of our blessedness.

Joy is different than happiness or pleasure. Joy expands the heart and brings gratitude to its fullness. Joy expands our capacity to receive and appreciate our truest desires. We've all had our good times, our blessed times. We've loved a few people here and there along the way, and here and there along the way, with any luck at all, we've been loved. There have been moments of bravery and wisdom and kindness beyond what we felt capable. At times we've had a glimpse of the people we might be, that at our best we sometimes long to be. Here and there we've resonated in harmony with others and knew what our lives together could be..

And these moments in our lives, the good and the difficult moments, are sacrament that point to their source. They can continue in our lives because of Christ – if we are willing to trust them and hope in what God can make possible. They will not continue if we rely on ourselves – hope in our possibilities. But they will continue if we let go of ourselves and let God be our Hope and surprise us. Paradoxically the place to begin is not with trying to hope but in being aware of our hopes and our lack of hope - both. God works in the wholeness of our lives and bringing awareness to the "either" and the "or" parts, the "hopeful" and "desperate" parts of our life allow God's unconditional love to do its work in our lives.

Elizabeth's greeting to Mary, HAIL TO YOU, FULL OF GRACE, THE LORD IS WITH YOU, BLESSED ARE YOU AMONG ALL PEOPLE, AND BLESSED IS THE FRUIT IN YOUR WOMB, JESUS is also a welcoming to the divine alive within us.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - **PATHWAYS / Stillpoint**

INNER VIEWS

"Mary pondered all these things in her heart." (Luke 2:19 & 2:51)

The extraordinary gift of God loving us is so much a part of our lives that it seems very ordinary. God's love is like the air we breathe. The only time we become aware of it is when we feel cut off. Pondering, silent presence is the ordinary way we become aware of God loving us.

We begin with faith, with learning to trust God's immediate and intimate presence in our life. And we catch faith from faithful people like Mary.

When we approach ourselves with a religious frame of mind we often approach ourselves with an idea that there is something we must change about our self. We read the scriptures looking for what we must do right and stop doing wrong. We think of God as the ultimate judge and so we work at judging our self, trying to beat God to the punch.

ARCHIVES ADVENT

There are situations in which we must make judgments but our judgments are never the whole truth about the situation. Judgments dissect us and others. God is far more interested in us as a whole person. "Pondering" our lives is much closer to God's attitude toward us.

"The god of dirt came up to me and whispered so many delectable things..." the poet Mary Oliver wrote. It's easy to think of God as sunshine, enlightening us, but dirt! God's presence speaks in all creation and all of our creation, all of who we are. God speaks silently in the humus, the dirt of our humanness as in our loftiest thoughts. God is an equal opportunity lover, "who lets his sun shine on the good and the bad alike," as the poet Jesus tells us.

As we prepare ourselves for the New Year maybe we can take time to sit with Mary and ponder. Her quiet calm is catching. Pondering is a way of being present to all that is God's.

What would happen in the new year if, instead of dissecting ourselves with a list of judgments about how we should control our life, what if we simply trust God living and loving and growing our lives out of the fertile soil of this present moment? We could ponder this with Mary and let God do the heavy lifting.

Blessings.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - **PATHWAYS / Stillpoint**

INNER VIEWS

The punch line to the parable of the Prodigal Son ends like this:

"You are with me always and all that I have is yours." (Luke 15:32)

All!

"All" is comfort food to the spirit. Who doesn't want it all? We do, because we are made to receive all. St. Augustine caught this reality so succinctly: "My heart is restless until it rests in you, my God."

But this is a parable and like the fairy tales about a genie who grants three wishes we need to watch what we wish for. "All" means everything, the good and bad alike; the whole of it all.

"God shines his sun on the good and bad alike." (Mr. 5:45).

ARCHIVES ADVENT

Our ego/mind wants to separate the good from the bad, to become perfect by excluding the imperfect; to reserve God's light for the just; and to restrict salvation to our people - the ones who believe like us. We want all for our self, but we don't want it for all.

The great insight of the spiritual path is that our ego/mind is not the whole thing - although it loves to pose as all that we are. Our ego is our mind creating a sense of our self out of words and ideas.

We are much more than any word we use to describe our self. Think of a quality that you would use to describe yourself. That quality comes and goes. Sometimes you are that way; sometimes you are not. But something about you remains though all of your qualities come and go.

Something about you can be aware of all that is going on within you and all the qualities, thoughts and feelings that pass through you. That something about you remains through all the changes is your eternal spirit: Eternal because you are being loved into existence by an eternal Creator and you are an expression of everlasting love. You are made to live "happily ever after.". This "something about you" is your spirit and you exist spiritually not because of what you do but because all of you is God's.

Blessings.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - **PATHWAYS / Stillpoint**

INNER VIEWS

The Wedding Feast at Cana (John 2:1-11)

This story is from John's Gospel. John's Gospel reveals its message in symbols and images. It bypasses our head to plant faith in our hearts. And the seed being planted (the "sign" as John calls it) is like a sacrament. It uses things we can see, smell, taste and feel to reveal the deeper reality of God's intimate and immediate presence in our lives.

This sign is simple, "Son they have no more wine." Jesus tells the waiter to fill the six jars with water and then take a cup to the head waiter, who declares "You've saved the best wine until last." This isn't a gospel excuse for wine snobbery. It's the revelation of the meaning of religious faith.

John gives us lots of clues to get our imagination going. Start with the six stone jars. These are used for the ceremonial cleansing of guests who have arrived dusty and dirty from walking to the banquet. They use the water to wash off the external grit and grime.

Jesus tells the waiter "Fill them to the brim." This sign is about the abundance of God's presence. Later in John's gospel Jesus will tell the woman at the well, "The water that I will give will

ARCHIVES ADVENT

become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). At Cana, when the water gushes up, it becomes wine.

Wine is a sign of the Spirit transforming the person from within with the life giving, loving reality of God. The fragile human spirit (water) is transformed by the divine Spirit. We are so united to God that we become eternal spirit, human expressions of divine love.

God is not an ideology. God cannot be reduced to words or concepts. God is the living experience of love and truth. When we awaken to divine presence, even to a brief glimpse, we feel ourselves illuminated with a radiant energy that shines all around us.

Anything short of fully awakening, of brimming with divine light, will leave us longing for more, longing for infinity. If we pay attention to our longing, if we let our desire work on us, let it stir us deeply instead of distracting ourselves with externals, our longing will become a prayer. All we have to do is speak that prayer, admit our longing, feel its insatiable need and God will respond. That's the point of John's Gospel, God responds to human need. And Jesus is that response.

God's response is where this story began, "Son they have no wine." Mary is telling her divine son, "They need you here, right now."

Jesus responds enigmatically, "Woman this is not my hour." This is not what I'm all about. But it is his hour because there is human need. All the rest of the signs in this Gospel will be responses to human need.

Jesus comes to fill us with divine life as the remedy for our fragile humanness. When the royal official says, "come down before my little boy dies" (John 4:48); when the lame man blurts out his helplessness, "I have no one to put me into the pool" (John 5:7); when there are too many people to feed and Philip says in despair, "Six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little" (John 6:7); when the blind beggar remembers his need, "I was blind..." (John 9:25); when Mary and Martha, aching with their fear of losing Lazarus, send a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (John 11:13), Jesus signs the presence of God. This is the only real remedy to our human frailty our limited power to provide what we really need.

The fullest sign will take place at Jesus' "hour." At this moment in Cana his hour has not yet come. His hour is the cross and it reveals the way God works with our humanness. This is the path of divine love. It does not save from the outside by divine fiat or overwhelming force. Divine love compassionately shares human suffering to save us from the inside. The condition for making good wine at the wedding of Cana is drinking the sour wine on the cross of Golgotha (John 19:29).

Religion doesn't offer us an alternative world that makes up for this one. It offers the depths of this world as the only place to find the divine presence as the healing remedy to all that is needed in this world. To be religious is to give our life so that the world may be more beautiful, more

ARCHIVES ADVENT

just, more at peace; it is to prevent egotistical and self-serving ends from disrupting this harmony of the whole.

Have some wine!

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - **PATHWAYS / Stillpoint**

INNER VIEWS

It's beginning to look a lot like Christianity

“There is no question that there is an unseen world. The problem is how far is it from midtown, and how late it's open.” Woody Allen – Feathers

We intuit and yearn for a transcendence that we cannot see or grasp. We might experience it as a dissatisfaction in our lives or as a calling to something far more satisfying than anything we've found in our lives so far. No matter how we feel about it, sense its possibility, or imagine it, we have been seduced onto a spiritual path.

This path holds out the hope of meeting our transcendence in the form of the God who loves us onto our path. Many of us come to feel like we are wandering aimlessly. We feel like we're spinning our wheels, stuck in a muck of mediocrity.

Take heart. This is a necessary quality of the path. It is a way that we learn to let go and love our life as it is. It is a way of awakening to our life, in all its blandness and ordinariness, as the place of Divine presence.

We are about to enter the church season of Advent. We'll hear the call to “awake” throughout this season. It is Jesus pointing us into the mystery of our deep identity as a Beloved child of God. The official word for this mystery is “Incarnation.” It is the revelation that is central to Christianity, God became a body, a human being, God became flesh as John's Gospel says (John 1:14).

For us material reality is both the hiding place and the revelatory place of God; where God is both hidden and revealed. The material is spiritual. The unlimited Creator of the universe is present in the limits and ordinariness of our world. The all knowing God, who is beyond our knowing, is known in flesh and blood. The God who cannot be confined by words has become the Word made flesh and dwelling among us. Throughout Christian history we have often been scandalized by this reality and tried to push God back into a purely spiritual and distant heaven. When this happens Jesus is considered a divine know-it-all who played a human role. This is not the Jesus of revelation or the gospels.

The season of Advent is meant to awaken us in wonder and awe to the divine beauty of flesh and blood, ordinary life. This mystery takes on its fulfillment and meaning by expanding our identity, our way of perceiving our self and our shared selves. Here is the meaning of the incarnation of divinity in humanity that we share with Jesus (quoted from *Why God Loves us...no matter what*). It is based on who we are because of God's generosity and love.

ARCHIVES ADVENT

Who are we?

We are the ones who must learn to live a double destiny, human and divine. And who must learn to love all of who we are. This is the only way that we can truly effect the quality of our living and loving.

We are the Beloved children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus. We are the ones to whom our silent Father has spoken his Word to awaken us to the immediate, sustaining, embracing and inclusive intimacy of his love.

We are humans, limited by time and space, wounded by fear, anger and defensive judgments, who Jesus seeks to heal, and the Spirit seeks to transform into a fully free and creative response to Divine love.

We are the Beloved children, the love of the Trinity bursting forth into time and space, who come to know the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, our brother, as the meaning and healing of our own lives.

We are the ones who, freed by humility, are willing to let go of our ego and mind as the arbiter of value and the locus of control, and thus able to find the spaciousness to let the divine/ human mystery of Jesus illuminate our identity.

We are the children with beginner's mind who respond to the human, vulnerable and divine child in the crib. This vulnerability frees our own vulnerability so that we can respond from our true self.

We are the ones who are so loved by the Creator of the Universe that the Creator becomes one of us, and saves us by the intimacy of being with us as our eternal Source.

We are the ones whose desires drive us into a consumer stampede every Christmas until we succumb to exhaustion and begin to feel our deepest desire which, joy of joys, is just the mirror image of God's desire for us.

This coming Advent season is meant to lift us up and awaken us to the wonder and awe of who we are because of who God is. It's meant to stretch our way of perceiving ourselves and open our soul to receive God's love as the source of our loving.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - PATHWAYS / Stillpoint