

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The First Sunday of Advent
November 27, 2016

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You all know that Advent Sunday is the beginning of the Church Year. It will be a year of grace. When the Gospel is proclaimed and the Mass is offered and prayed, and the sacraments are administered, the greatest thing on earth happens. Some souls, please God they are many, will turn to, or *re*-turn to, Almighty God in faith and practice. A year of grace provides many opportunities for each one of us to draw closer to Our Blessed Lord Jesus and be strengthened and directed by His Sovereign Presence in our lives. There will be opportunities to do what Saint Paul exhorted us to do: “Cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” Elsewhere the Apostles declares when we were baptized we “first put on” Christ. But here he refers to those continual conversions by which we become ever more and more like God. You do not need me to tell you Christian discipleship is not a one shot deal! “Been there, done that.” No. We are constantly casting off the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light.

Since none of us here is likely a brand-new Christian, we have heard this Advent call many times. In our past history, some years have indeed been years of grace: God’s gracious kingship finding more and more room to rule in our hearts. Perhaps in other years there has not been so much progress. We may have missed opportunities, or actually turned away from God. Advent Sunday is the right time to be alert to an important question: How will you respond to the year of grace that begins today?

Your response will not be to a new story but to *an old story made new* in us. The way we become conformed to Christ is not by being entertained each year in a brand-new way that gets our attention by being totally repackaged from last year’s approach. We become conformed to Christ when by His grace we patiently copy His life and teaching.

Some of you are old enough to remember the old Palmer Method teaching handwriting. Young hands are awkward. Large letters, even just parts of each letter, were set before us on ruled paper, and we traced over them. You traced the back side of the capital letter “C” over and over on the dark outline, then over a lighter outline, and finally all on your own on the ruled paper. At first the pencil stumbled. But day-by-day as you did your copies, all became easier. Finally you

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could make the capital letter “C” without effort and even without the ruled paper. And then it was no longer the Palmer Method’s perfect capital letter “C”. It was your very own.

Of course the invention of the typewriter and keyboard is the death knell to handwriting (and letter writing as well). But in its way the old Palmer Method was a reflection of the far more wonderful and marvelous activity of God the Holy Ghost. His “office is the Church.” And He takes the things of Christ and shows them to us to copy in our lives. The Holy Ghost helps our awkward souls by guiding us to practice and practice again what He has revealed, until it all becomes second nature to us. It is the old story made new in us. The old story of salvation is heard again and again until it is internalized and put into practice in our lives.

What will make this year a year of grace for you? There will be some events or occasions, perhaps personal and private, or social and public, in which the Gospel of Christ will suddenly come alive. The Gospel will have a fresh and vital penetration into the very place that rules and motivates everything you do. It may be as if you were hearing it for the first time and being excited by its newness and endless possibilities. The Gospel may be appropriated in a new way by opportunities to put it into action. These may be surprising or undesired ways. You may encounter and assist some soul struggling in material or spiritual difficulty and in that soul find for yourself an encounter with the Lord Jesus. Perhaps it will take the form of a serious trial of some sort, a personal anxiety or illness forcing you to dig deeper into your relationship with Jesus Christ and cling more closely to Him, even hanging on for dear life.

You may be reading a familiar Bible passage or revisiting some old prayer or devotional book which previously left you unmoved, only to get some fresh insight from it. That is what happened to John Wesley, who felt “strangely warmed” by a passage of scripture he had known all his life. Archbishop Anthony Bloom told us of his experience of the Divine Presence, describing a familiar person standing behind him in the most natural way and breathing softly right behind his chair. Anthony Bloom sensed this Presence was kind and warm and good and loving beyond anything he had ever experienced or imagined. He did not dare turn around

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to look, not because he knew he would see nothing but because he did not want the moment to ever end.

There are as many continuing conversions as there are souls. But all such experiences build on the old story heard again and again. Practicing Palmer Method has as its sole reason the happy day you could put down the ruled paper with its letter shapes and wrote your own letter in your own hand. And you developed your own distinctive handwriting. The Christian Year gives us the life of Christ, year and after, for our pattern and imitation. Not that we listen to it and eventually put it off! *We put it on*, as St Paul says: “casting off the work of darkness and putting on the armor of light.” The armor of light, St. Paul says, is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Advent Sunday is the time for Christian New Year resolutions. Week in and week out Holy Mother Church proclaims the whole Gospel, the old story made new so that in this year of grace we may respond in Gospel ways to the opportunities in our lives. But it will all boil down to St Paul’s message to “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” Put Him on as *Lord*, to rule you. Put Him on as *Jesus*, to save you. And in the Lord Jesus put Him on as *Christ*, anointed and appointed by the Father, to rule and save us all.