

## 18 December 2011 Advent 4 Matins

Ps 144; Isaiah 7: 10-16; Romans 1: 1-7

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Advent is an uneasy season, fraught with tensions and ambiguities. We stand at the start of the Church's year (and in the darkest part of the calendar year) on the brink of something new: the new gift that God is about to give us through the birth of his son, Immanuel, God with us. Throughout this season we should yearn for that coming with eager anticipation, seeking to make ourselves ready, awakened from our natural sleepy complacency to consider our lives afresh in the light of the gift of God's incarnate self. Yet that coming doesn't merely challenge our sense of self, it threatens to overturn the natural order and challenge us in unexpected ways. For the inscrutable sovereign mystery of the person of Jesus rests on contradiction: he is both the baby, born of the young woman of Isaiah's prophecy, and the Son of David, as Paul affirmed. He is the promised Messiah who offers continuity with the old dynasty of Israel, the old promises made by the prophets. In Advent we ask what difference the birth of that baby will make. How will our lives change when that baby is born? Everything will be different when God is with us: Immanuel. As the time of his coming draws near, we have the opportunity to reflect on how we try to give meaning to this momentous event.

Preaching at the Eucharist on Advent Sunday, Canon Tilby held out her arms in her chasuble so that we could see her properly and reminded us that the colour of Advent is purple. But I found myself asking then why purple is the colour for this season of anticipation and waiting. It is kept traditionally as a penitential season in the church, although without the same strictness as Lent. Since I already knew that in the earlier middle ages, the period on which I work as a Church historian, purple was not the colour of Advent, this question has been niggling in my mind every since that Sunday. When did Advent become purple, and what does that mean? Does it matter what liturgical colours we use for the different seasons, and how do they affect our responses to worship?

Advent developed slowly as a distinct season within the Early Church and its origins remain contested; interestingly, the Eastern churches do not keep it. Some of the earliest evidence for the treatment of Advent as a period of preparation and spiritual discipline comes from the early church in France, where the three weeks before Epiphany (one of the times in the Church year when new converts might be baptised) became a period in which the new converts prepared themselves spiritually for their new birth with Christ. Only in the late fifth century is there clear liturgical evidence for specific services for Advent with their own designated prayers, antiphons, readings, and responses. Pope Gregory the Great (who died in 604) is conventionally given some responsibility for formalising that liturgy. It was not, however, until the twelfth century that the Church began to attribute specific liturgical colours to particular feasts and seasons of the Church year; so there was no fixed colour for Advent in the early period. As a penitential time of prayer and fasting, Advent was often linked to Lent and vestments were probably either black (appropriate for penance) or as in Lent, unbleached: without any colour at all.

The earliest known liturgical colour sequence is that of Black Canons of the Latin Church of Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem. Early in the twelfth century they ordered that black should be used throughout Advent, including Lauds, Mass and Vespers on Christmas Eve and at the Midnight mass of Christmas and Matins that night. At the dawn mass of Christmas Day they went to red and only adopted a festal white for the third High Mass of Christmas Day. Innocent III produced a slightly different sequence of colours for the church year before he became pope in 1198; but he, too, argued for black during Advent. The first English liturgical colour cycle, produced at Lichfield c. 1240 also specifies black for Advent. Yet, in the later medieval English Church, we find a variety of different colours being worn: Westminster Abbey used white continually from Advent Sunday till Candelmas, including at the Midnight and Dawn masses of Christmas; Wells Cathedral wore blue; Salisbury, York, King's College, Cambridge and Winchester College all wore red. Only in Exeter in the fourteenth century do we find evidence for the wearing of purple in Advent; an inventory from the cathedral archives lists a violet chasuble and two purple copes for Advent use.<sup>1</sup> Our modern colour sequence in fact owes nothing to English medieval practice but rather derives from prescriptions made by the Roman Church during the Counter Reformation in 1570 which sought to unify practice across the Western Church and then designated Advent as purple. The practice in the Church of England now follows the Roman rite.

Does it matter, I hear you ask? Should we care what colours are used for the ribbons that mark the pages of the Bible on the lectern, the altar hanging, the priest's and deacon's vestments, the covers of the Eucharist booklets and the pew sheets? At one level, no of course it doesn't matter. You can safely leave it to the vergers to get this right and deem the colour of the day to have little impact on your own experience of worship. But at another level, the colour that we use in the liturgy subliminally affects all of us as we listen to the reading of scripture, join in prayer, and participate in the celebration of the Eucharist. The gold of major feasts like Christmas Day lifts our hearts as we rejoice at the mystery of the Incarnation; the deep red of Passiontide focuses our minds on the suffering of Christ. Colours encapsulate the significance of seasons for us, expressing the inner meaning which words, music and performed liturgy will then tease out and explain. So what does it mean for Advent to be purple?

The medieval use of black for Advent symbolised its penitential character; that we are accustomed to purple in Advent and Lent may lead us now to equate purple with penance, fasting and self-discipline. But that was not, entirely, how the early medieval Church understood purple. Purple was, the Early Church knew well, the colour of royalty, closely associated with Roman emperors. When the Roman historian Suetonius wanted to convey the extravagance of the Emperor Nero, he said that he went fishing with a net made just for him out of gold strung with cords of purple and scarlet (Suetonius, *Nero*, 30: 3). Purple therefore represented the epitome of luxury in the ancient world, not least because purple dye was so

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. St John Hope and E.G. Cuthbert F. Atchley, *An Introduction to English Liturgical Colours* (SPCK 1918).

expensive, coming from the shells of the whelk, *murex*.<sup>2</sup> One of the most famously-exhibitionist bishops of the early English Church, Wilfrid, supposedly bought vestments of purple and silk to ornament his churches, displaying his ostentatious décor at Ripon in the presence of kings (Stephen, *Life of Wilfrid*, ch. 24). If purple meant luxury and royalty, how could it have been suitable for a season like Advent which should be characterised by reflection and self-denial?

When Pope Gregory the Great in his *Regula pastoralis*, a handbook for bishops, explained the meaning of purple in priests' vestments he wrote: 'purple is mixed with the gold and the blue so that the priest, while he has hope in his own heart for the heavenly things that he is preaching, may also repress in himself even the intimations of vice and oppose them as if with royal power, ... clothing himself in the habits of a heavenly kingdom.' (Gregory, *Reg. Past.* 2: 3) So for Gregory, purple, once the colour of pagan Roman emperors, had become the colour of the king of heaven, and the symbol of his kingdom. Yet the eighth-century English theologian Bede, talking about the colours of the veil of the tabernacle, quoted that same passage of Gregory only to contradict it. To Bede, purple represented the blood of Christ, for, he argued, it displays the colour of blood (*De tabernaculo*, 3: 4). 'It designates the devout hearts of those who are able to say to the Lord with the prophet, "because for your sake we are being killed all the day long, we are counted as sheep for the slaughter"' (Ps 43: 22; *De tab* 2: 2). We offer purple, Bede said, when we subject the body to suffering (*De tab* 1: 3) He went on, 'The colour purple can also be understood as the spilling of one's blood for Christ, or as the endurance of various afflictions; or it is the very cross that we who follow the Lord are ordered to bear daily. Hence rightly does the appearance of such a colour shine among others on the shoulder of the priest that it may teach him to be always prepared to suffer adversities.' (*De tab*: 3: 4)

On this reading, purple does indeed appear highly apt for Advent. Yet I would argue it does so precisely because it conveys both the character of royalty and that of blood and so suffering (and thus self-denial). For in Advent we await both the coming of the baby born to the young woman (or virgin) which the prophecy we heard from Isaiah is conventionally taken to prefigure, and we await also the second coming of Christ the king as judge of all at the end of time. As the fulfilment of Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, Christ comes as the successor to the house of David. In the extended salutation and greeting that he provided at the start of his letter to the Romans, Paul identified himself closely with the gospel, promised through God's prophets in the scriptures. That gospel, he wrote, concerns God's son, 'who was descended from David according to the flesh'. This claim associates Jesus firmly with the people of Israel and, makes him, 'according to the flesh', not just the successor to the royal house but, by blood, one of its number. As the angel said to Mary: 'and now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David'. (Luke 1: 30-32)

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<sup>2</sup> George Henderson, 'The Colour Purple', in his *Vision and Image in Early Christian England* (CUP, 1999), pp. 122-35.

In this season we await the coming of that promised son, Immanuel, God with us. The purple which symbolises this time represents the memory of Christ's blood and the willingness of those who follow the Lord to share his adversities. But it also reminds us of Christ our king, of his heavenly kingdom, and of his descent from that royal house of David. Our first hymn, 'O come, O come Emmanuel' drew on the ancient antiphons for Advent (the O antiphons for the Magnificat at Vespers sung on the seven days before Christmas Eve); they embody these themes in affirming the coming of Jesus as the Son of God, the Rod of Jesse and the Key of David. They join our purple regalia, the clothing of kingship, and bring us full circle to the message – the meaning – of Advent. 'O come thou key of David come /and open wide our heavenly home / make safe the way that leads on high / and close the path to misery.' Come, Lord, come.