

## **Sermon: ADVENT 1, November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015**

In the Name...

A quiz show contestant was asked to name two of Santa's reindeer. The contestant responded "Rudolph and Olive." The host looked confused and said, "We'll accept Rudolph, but, can you explain Olive?" The man said, "You know, Olive, the other reindeer, used to laugh and call him names..."

Today, as we begin the season of Advent with its theme of preparation for the coming of Christ, I am going to begin by straying completely outside of Christian culture and theology to illustrate a point that is behind the origins and practice of the season.

Among the stories that have come down to us from Antiquity, none is as compelling as the Iliad of Homer - the story of the ten year war between the Greeks and Trojans. Perhaps we may recall the names of the great heroes: Achilles, Odysseus and Agamemnon, the beautiful Helen, the famous wooden horse. But, the character I'd like to look at today is, I'm sure; totally obscure to us, the Greek chief Philoctetes.

He's a strangely tragic character in the story and his plight is one which sounds bizarre to our modern ears. Philoctetes is cast away on a desert island because the other chiefs blame him for the gods not hearing their prayers. You see, Philoctetes was afflicted with an incurable running sore. And this was bad enough for him, but, by the conventions of their religion all the chiefs had to offer sacrifice together for the success of their army and Philoctetes was religiously unclean because of his affliction. And so, he was marooned by the others so that his uncleanness wouldn't be held against them.

Now, this may sound like a rather harsh fate. The poor fellow was condemned for something that wasn't his fault. It was just his bad luck to have a chronic sickness. But, the concept of ritual purity was extremely important in the ancient world and in many other religions to this day.

There has been a common consent throughout history and across cultures that human beings are, by their very nature, frail, fallible, and imperfect. As such, we cannot presume to approach the gods until some attempt has been made to raise ourselves up to the higher plane of being where the gods dwell.

Sometimes these purification rites involve certain dances which must be performed, or special body paint or clothing which must be worn. In many religions, having some sickness automatically bans one from worship. That's why lepers, the blind, the deaf, the lame, etc. were traditionally regarded as the most unfortunate of beings, because they could never join in the religious ceremonies of the community.

And there are often temporary restrictions, for example, on women after giving birth. Now, this isn't a punishment for having done something really wrong, it's because childbirth is something

really human. Gods don't have children. That's a human thing, so a period of time has to elapse for that humanness to be considered worn off.

Ritual purity. Again, that's why the animals brought for sacrifice had to be carefully examined. Any hint of medical or physical imperfection had to be avoided to avoid offending God. People back then thought of God as thin-skinned and ready to destroy anybody who offended him in the least.

Fortunately, our understanding of God has moved on beyond that, thank God, because, while Advent is a time of preparation, preparation for Christmas, the greatest act of communication between God and Man, it's different because, in this case, it's not Man trying to reach up to God's high place, but, God leaving his high place and reaching down to Man. Not Man trying to detach himself from life and the flesh, but, God taking human flesh and entering our life.

Christmas, you see, is the complete reversal of what religion was about for thousands of years and Advent is how we prepare for it - spiritually, not physically.

That is the difference between now and then, between the present and the past, between Christianity and every other world religion. In all these other religions the emphasis has been on the physical state of the worshippers. In Christianity, however, the emphasis is on our spiritual state.

The Greek chiefs who abandoned Philoctetes may have been sound of body, but, they were callous, corrupt, fornicating, deceitful, arrogant, and practiced a thousand other vices and thought nothing of it. For them, religion had nothing to do with morality or ethics. It was all about ceremony.

On the other hand, the God of Israel had a lot to say about morality and ethics, but, even so, there was still the temptation for people to focus on ceremony. When challenged by the Pharisees about why he didn't observe certain washing ceremonies before eating, Jesus responded that nothing that goes into a man's body can defile him, only what comes out of the heart. The Pharisees' obsession with outward rituals had led them to ignore the inward spirit which the rituals were meant to foster. And that's why we need Advent.

This is the time of year when we spend a lot of time and money on outward rituals - stringing lights, hanging garlands, decorating trees, buying presents. Many of us will go to parties and others of us will host them. We'll put time and effort into hoovering carpets, dusting furniture, keeping bath and kitchen facilities shining.

Our Advent observance should also include the same components - cleaning and decorating - but, for our souls. How have we been living this past year? How should we have been living? And, so, God wants us to redecorate, not our homes, but, our lives. He wants us to take up some new habits, renew ourselves, and find new ways of keeping his Word and example.

The message of Christmas is that God doesn't have a problem with us being human and to prove the point he became human himself. God is not high up and far away. He's been here and he remembers how it was.

But, he also doesn't allow us to use being human as an excuse for not being as human as he was. That is, he was able to lead a spiritual life here on earth and so can we. It's not impossible. It's not easy, but, it's do-able.

So, now, it's up to us to remember that he was “down here.” May we take this Advent to remember that and live as if we were “up there.”

In the Name...