

Liturgy and Alertness

The First Sunday of Advent. Year B, RCL. Mark 13:24-37. December 3, 2017. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

Beginning this Sunday, I am beginning a theme that will keep cropping up in my sermons. I will highlight some feature of worship, speaking briefly (but, I pray, usefully) of where that feature comes from and what it means now. Today's feature is *liturgy*, more specifically the *liturgical year*.

Today is the beginning of a new year for the branches of the Western Christian church that use the standard liturgical calendar. Which is most of them, to one degree or another. The Eastern churches, as usual, differ somewhat; their new liturgical year begins on the first of September. Ours begins on the first day of Advent, which the Sunday that falls closest to November 30th.

Liturgical means having to do with liturgy, which is the ancient term for what human beings do in community worship; it comes from the Classical Greek word *leitourgia*, which means the work of the people. In Christian usage, liturgy refers especially to Sunday worship, and even more particularly to the Eucharist, but the term "liturgy" covers all ceremonies in a general way.

From very early on in our faith's two thousand year history, each liturgical year has followed the general pattern of celebrating various occasions in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ; various saints; various points of theology, such as the Trinity; and various matters of regional or denominational significance, such as Thanksgiving or the Reformation. These come around in a pattern of yearly repetition, often with associated seasons such as Advent, Christmastide,

Eastertide and the season after Pentecost—all of which have associated thematic colors, such as the blue or violet commonly used during Advent.

Simultaneously (and connected with the various events and seasons of the year) the liturgical cycle covers a great deal of the Bible in sets of readings designed to be used at services (and for private devotion) throughout the year. There are three cycles of Sunday readings (A, B, and C) featuring Matthew, Mark and Luke—the three Synoptic Gospels, that is, the three Gospels that tell the story of Jesus’ ministry in roughly the same way. Separate sets of readings go with the Daily Offices, which in our tradition are principally Morning and Evening Prayer, which are, in principle, the liturgies used every day, whether the Eucharist is celebrated or not. (And yes, I know there are other prayer offices, like late evening prayer office called Compline, which almost everyone loves who has ever experienced it; I’m giving a simplified explanation here.)

All this is why we shifted this Sunday to a new set of readings—set B, featuring the Gospel according to Mark—and why we have shifted to the color blue, symbolizing the dawn of anticipation and a penitential perspective.

But...why do all this shifting around?

This is my favorite answer to that: to help us keep on the alert, to keep our perspective fresh, and to remind us that the truth of God in Christ is at the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Human beings live seasonally; because of the tilt of our planet, sunlight and weather vary throughout the course of a year. This is a basic feature of life on earth that all religions—all cultural systems of any kind—make use of. Life is new every day, every season, and yet patterns repeat. We need to be aware of them and what they mean, for agriculture, for travel...and for

salvation. Shifting gears liturgically helps keep our perspective fresh, our minds and hearts open and our awareness of God's activity more lively.

This being more awake, more alert for God, makes a general kind of sense, of course, but it is also something that Holy Scripture most earnestly advises us to do. It was a feature of Jesus' preaching. Indeed, it is a major feature of today's reading, our first in the new Church year from the selection of readings from Mark's Gospel. Today's selection is often called the Little Apocalypse of Mark. Yes, it's one of those hair-raising readings about the end of the world as we know it and the beginning of Jesus' reign in fullness of his kingdom in the New Heaven and the New Earth. But Our Lord's admonition to be on the alert for God, as witnesses *and agents* of his love, his justice, and his peace, requires us to be awake and open to what is happening in our world all the time and for all reasons—not just because Jesus might appear in glory at any moment.

If we were to make a Christian resolution for this new liturgical year, this new Church year, perhaps it should be to take Jesus' message to "keep awake...keep alert" (Mark 13:33,35, NRSV) absolutely to heart. What does God want you, me, *us*, to be paying attention to, praying about, acting on *right now*? May all our *right nows* throughout this new year be created in power by the vigor and vigilance of the Gospel.