

Advent - A Hungarian Perspective

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The fact that we were a Hungarian family was not too striking for most Americans, who see people from every nation of the world living in the U.S.A. However, when we told people we were visitors from Hungary who would be returning there after I finished my teaching activity in the U.S.A., their eyes widened. People were eager to talk about the sudden and profound changes in Eastern Europe, where Hungary was in the front line. We found this interest not only among the well-informed academic folk, but also in such places as a Manhattan underground passage, where a Hindu hotdog salesman shook my hand and spoke of 1956 after he learned we were from Hungary. It was a belated compensation for the bargain that the West made at our cost in that year.

As for the changes at home: During our stay in the U.S.A., there were free elections — for the first time in forty-three years — and a new parliament. A new government was established. A new constitution opened the way for human rights and a market economy. After we returned home, however, we found that the mass media, to a great extent, is in the same old hands (July 1990). These people want to prove their loyalty to the new freedom of the press by tough, ruthless criticism of the new government. This creates an atmosphere of anxiety, fear, and suspicion in the average citizen. After the non-functioning centralization of all commercial activities, privatization, the basic point of the new economy is just beginning. The press makes gloomy forecasts of unemployment in a country where people were long accustomed to full employment.

Sixty percent of the Hungarian population are nominally Roman Catholic. Twenty percent belong to the Reformed Church, and five percent to the Lutheran Church. Most of the remainder are tiny groups who claim and exercise more and more political power. They are conservative and rigid, and other denominations worry about their intolerance, fearing a situation similar to that before World War II.

The most critical situation, however, is the internal crisis of the Reformed Church, the church I know best, since I am a practicing parish minister in Szentendre. We are experiencing a refreshing emergence of new hopes after a long period of depression and almost sinful skepticism. Oppression had broken the spiritual backbones of many communities and individuals.

But we face serious difficulties in this new transition, as well. Suddenly, more services are requested of us, and in areas where we lack appropriate training and qualifications. Religious teaching will be elective in all schools, and we do not have enough trained teachers. Hospitals and prisons are open for pastoral care, but there are no chaplains trained to serve. (This author led the first Clinical Pastoral Training held in Hungary in summer 1990.)

University students want to hear the gospel and talk to Christians who can communicate their faith to scientifically minded, modern youth. A Church, which had been engaged in mere survival, and consequently petrified, has much to do to cope with all these new tasks. These new needs call for concentration, unity, and able leaders. Instead, there are competing groups with different spiritual backgrounds and with hostile feelings for one another. The coming reelection of officials threatens even those leaders of the church whose expertise would be of vital importance in this enormous transition. However, the reelection will be the first since 1947 in which the leaders of the church will not be nominated, officially "approved in advance," by state authorities!

As for the general situation of Christianity in Hungary, sixty-three percent of the adult population claims to be "believers" in some way, but only about a third of that number have actual church relations. The rate of alcoholism is very high. Fifty-two percent of adult men visit a public drinking place at least daily. Crime and drug abuse are increasing and becoming more and more organized. Hungary leads the world in suicides and is second in divorces. In a country of 10 million inhabitants (with 5 million more Hungarians living outside the borders for historical reasons), there have been 4.5 million abortions from 1956 until 1990. In addition, there is a 20 billion dollar foreign debt, made by the previous regime, to be repaid by this generation. This debt makes any fast economic development almost impossible. The inflation rate is thirty percent, ten times higher than five years ago.

And so the title of my article: "Advent — A Hungarian Perspective." What can we hope for? Trying to respond to this question, we must consider three facts.

I

God's people live out of the promises of the God of history, but those promises are highly ambiguous; more precisely, double-edged. To understand this, we have to remember that the word "advent" is not a biblical term, but an abstraction of early medieval development of Christian doctrine. It summarizes, necessarily in an abstract way, the "coming close" of God, mentioned in both the Old and the New Testaments. This eschatological "coming close" of God is basically of two natures: either for judgment or for salvation. Both are possible. God's arrival is promised, but it may be a coming "to judge the earth" (Ps. 96:13), to judge "my faithful, who sealed my covenant by sacrifice" (Ps. 50:5), or even a coming which is "a disaster, a unique disaster," when "the end is coming for the four corners of the country," when "I shall show you no pity" (Ezek. 7:2-4). But God's coming can also be for healing, comfort, and salvation. "Behold the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young" (Is. 40:10-11). The verses in Zechariah 14:1-11 are the most characteristic of this contradictory nature of God's coming. Here we have the "advent," the coming close of God in both ways, concentrated within the events of a single day.

For the faithful, it is a fact that God will come. Precisely because of God's previous comings, in which we were convinced of God's faithfulness, we can reckon with God's future works and presence as well. It is this double nature, the contradictory character of the "coming close," that should not be forgotten. For, if one of the two prevails so that the other is diminished, our relation to the reality of God will be distorted. It is Christian self-deception to maintain the diversity of Old and New Testament in such a way that the first would be the book of judgment and the latter that of salvation and grace. The whole Scripture shares the knowledge of the dialectic character of God's advent. Remarkable is our readiness, however, to preach only on such texts which justify this bias and to avoid those which would contradict this prejudice.

The very word "advent" is one most of us have known since childhood, most probably in a good Christian family, where it was connected to the coming of the Christmas tree, and all the presents with it. Quite another part of our memories contains the references to judgment and justice, mostly shadowed by early memories of punishment and shame, which we would like to forget. So, in us these dichotomies are separated, contradictory, and unreconcilable.

In God, however, according to the testimonies of prophets and apostles, these are united, as being the original nature of the one God, unintelligible though it may be to our minds. Surely from that theological conviction the New Jerusalem Bible (1985) translated the word "zedek" as "saving justice," (e.g., Ps. 96:13). At any rate, advent is characterized by remembering God's deeds in the past and trusting in God's constancy, believing that God is not passive in the present or in the future. That is why God's promises are hard facts for the faithful.

II

It is within the actual context of the history of a nation, of a church, or of any group or individual that the Holy Spirit validates one particular aspect of God's arrival. Understanding is always a kind of revelation. It is even more so if it refers to the meaning of a certain historical event. Opening eyes and widening horizons are presents to God's people by the word of God and through the Holy Spirit. Remember, it was the *same exile* of God's people when they hung their harps upon the poplars (Ps. 137:2) and when they accepted God's calling to a mission for the whole of humanity: "He said: It is not enough for you to be my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the survivors of Israel; I shall make you a light to the nations, so that my salvation may reach the remotest parts of the earth" (Is. 49:6). Understanding the message given in a historical event is vital for God's people. This makes them different. That is what Jesus required from the leaders of Israel: to read the signs of the times (Matt. 16:1-4).

Instead of wanting a sign from heaven, we must have the humble openness to accept and understand the message of our own history as a nation, as a church, as a group, or as an individual! God's arrival, God's advent takes place in the factual history. It is not identical with history itself! It is more than that.

It is rightly understood history, out of which a new, just, righteous, and fruitful life derives, even through misery, mourning, and death. For God's promises are not limited by anything, including the farthest limits of our earthly existence. The center of the Christian faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus, testifies to God's promise: "You can not allow your faithful servant to see the abyss" (Ps. 16:10).

Ever since that event, we know that even the worst historical fact can have significance, which directs our eyes and faith to a meaningful hope for the consistency of God's promises of justice and salvation, or, "saving justice."

In this spirit, we are obliged here in Hungary to interpret our history and receive the message of the God of history. In this century there have been three major shocks which terrorized those who live here in the valley of Karapats. The first was at the end of World War I, when Hungary lost two-thirds of the original territory of the nation. The second was the "easternization" of the country at the end of the Second World War when it, with its western European culture, became part of an Eastern empire. The third was the revolution in 1956, when the Western powers, after encouraging Hungary, did not step in to halt the senseless blood-sacrifice of thousands of workers, university students, and teenagers.

That amount of suffering has to be interpreted. We have to be able to read the signs of the times. In front of God, we have to acknowledge that such a fate cannot be by chance. It does have its meaning. The exile of Israel was not by chance, but "he was crushed because of our guilt" (Is. 53:5), so in our own history we can discover the justice of the God of history. The details of this interpretation are certainly "private matters" of a nation. There is no doubt, however, that only within the actual historical context of a group or an individual can the Holy Spirit validate the particular aspect of God's arrival. It takes openness for both the historical facts and openness for the interpreting, validating Spirit of God.

Our advent in that sense is a bitter but still promising one. We know that God will come, since we experienced God's previous comings close. It was not only the enemy, it was not only the unfaithful allies, it was not only the weight of a superpower that shaped our history. It was God's "saving justice." And we do not see in it judgment alone. As the affluent and prospering nations are right not to forget the dark spots in their history, so we should not forget the light in ours. It is our survival both as a nation and as a community longing for the truth (Matt. 5:6); truth in the scientific, artistic, and moral sense, and truth in the sense of justice. Even our most recent history, during a devastating dictatorship, gave evidences of that survival. It is not because of our merit, but rather it is a gift of the God who is at work all around the world, even today.

III

God's arrival has practical consequences, and these are universally binding people together. Those who were "the same Spirit given to drink" (I Cor. 12:13) are one, regardless of their national origin. Nationality seems to be, on a practical (not a theoretical) level, a last barrier between people. Theories step across borders easily. History, however, shows a different picture. After the collapse of the hypothetical unity of a dictatorial world system, the oppressed

nations are now in danger of being led by their new powers toward hostility. This is one of the oldest recipes: unable to solve its inner tensions and problems, a nation turns its hostilities outside its borders rather than toward its leaders. Ethnic minorities are highly endangered by such tactics. Eastern Europe's future democratic development depends on that question. Certainly, it is a problem of communication. Today, mass media has the same responsibility that kings had in ancient times. Without the democratic control of mass media, there is not much hope for peaceful coexistence of nations and minorities, even less for the making of peace, promised to us for the messianic period, when "They will hammer their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into sickles, nation will not lift sword against nation; no longer will they learn how to make war" (Is. 2:4). Fear, on a short term, is a socially integrating factor; but only in the short term. No dictatorships can survive beyond a certain limit of time.

As for the practical consequences, God's arrival works in the same way. It makes people open, accepting, and just. This is, however, completely different from the integrating power of "civil religion" of the society. "Civil religion" produces well-adjusted citizens in an immobile, "ordered" society. God's people are, to the contrary, not to disappear in the sameness. They must not conform. Only one thing is common to them. They are the light of the world, and salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13-16). On the "arrival day" of God, when all evil passes away into the blazing furnace, the upright will shine like the sun (Matt. 13:43). This light-character is universal to all who understood the practical consequences of God's arrival. They are not smoky torches, like human endeavor, making as much dirt as light. God's sunshine is transparent through them. It is impossible that they would not recognize one another. God's advent binds them universally together. Over oceans, over national borders and prejudices, over ages and gender, and even over religious tradition.

Once again, this coming Christmas will be preceded by the time of Advent. Traditionally, this is the beginning of the church year, representing the expected same old problems or with brand new ones. Politicians and religious leaders will have occasions for declarations and messages. The sick and lonely will experience their misery even more deeply.

For a Hungarian Reformed minister, it will be a time of hope for a nation which has suffered much. It will be a time of learning from our history, from the good and the bad.

We need the sympathy and prayers of our brothers and sisters all around the world. Knowing that others remember our struggles and that we are not alone gives us much support.

In addition to this support, we know that we can rely on the promise of the God of history, who opens up for us again and again a new dimension of the fullness of the "kingdom." We are strengthened with the most sure promise: "The Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness for when we do not know how to pray properly, then the Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words" (Rom. 8:26).