What is Advent all about?

The Advent wreath we have blessed today reminds us of the millennia during which God’s people awaited the birth of the Messiah. Other than the thousands of centuries spanned by the first few chapters of Genesis and their story of primordial creation, the great bulk of the Old Testament covers a period of about four thousand years. Advent reminds us of those times:

the centuries after the fall of Adam and Eve, when sin had first entered the world, and when God gave the first promise about one who would crush the head of the serpent;
the centuries after Noah, when eight persons were saved through water as a sign of the coming redemption through baptism;
the centuries after Moses, when God instructed his people as to how they ought to live;
the centuries after King David, to whom was given the promise that one of his descendants would reign forever.

We know now, of course, that those ancient promises all pointed to the one who would be born of the Virgin Mary, the child Jesus.

What, then, is Advent all about? Is Advent a season about remembering this ancient wait for redemption? Is Advent about celebrating that great dividing line that separates human history into two halves, BC and AD, into the time “Before Christ” and our time AD, Anno Domini, in the Year of Our Lord?

Well, if Advent is about awaiting redemption, even the most cursory glance at world events reveals that there is no such dividing line through history. The redemption Christ came to bring is not yet complete. Anyone who reads the news on any given day will discover that the world is still full of hatred, violence, and error. The Islamic State, for instance, had killed 15,000 people over the last few years in Iraq and Syria, many of them martyred for their faith in Christ. So there are still many who “sit in darkness” and await the light of Christ.

So is Advent, then, a season that reminds us about those in our world today who still await redemption?

Yes—but we know, even we right here in Pittsford know, that hatred and sin are hardly the exclusive province of non-Christian people half a world away. So the line that divides “Before Christ” from “After” does not run through time, nor through some meridian on a map that divides continent from continent, nor even, if we are honest, does that line divide us here in this church from those outside. Rather, the line that divides what is redeemed from what is unredeemed runs straight through our heart.

Christ has won salvation for us by his Incarnation and his death and resurrection, and claimed us individually through Baptism, but his work of redemption still awaits our participation. Three times in his letters St. Paul speaks about we who are “being saved”, in the present tense. And in his letter to the Romans we heard, “our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” Even though
we’ve already received salvation through baptism, yet it is also something towards which we yet progress. This is what Advent is all about. Even as we prepare to celebrate the memorial of Christ’s first coming at Bethlehem, we must prepare to welcome Christ when He comes again. Nowhere, I think, is this captured more fully or more beautifully than in the Collect, the opening prayer, of today’s Mass:

“Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God, the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming.” Christ is not some long-dead historical figure whose actions are confined to the past, but rather He is a friend whose return we eagerly await.

Once when I was out to dinner with family I saw a friend whom I had not seen in a long time, totally by happenstance, walk into the very same restaurant. In surprise I leapt up from the table, scaring my poor mother half to death I think, and bounded across the room to catch his attention.

This is how Christ wants us to react as his coming. And as he told us in the Gospel, He will return suddenly and unexpectedly, ‘on an unknown day’ and at “an hour you do not expect.” And like any old friend, the first thing He will ask us is what we’ve been up to and how we’ve been doing.

This, I think, is the reason for the second clause in today’s prayer: “Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God, the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming.” When Christ returns, we must not meet him empty-handed. To use a different analogy, we must await Him not only like one awaits the return of a friend but like a child awaits the return of their parents. A young child who has completed a drawing is overjoyed to show it to his parents: “Look what I made!” In the same way, when Christ returns, let us welcome him not only eagerly, but with righteous deeds: “Look what I did, for You!” And not out of any hope of earning a reward but, like a child, simply to show our love, and to receive praise from the One who loves our meager efforts, even when we don’t manage to color inside the lines.

This Advent we wait for Christ. The single light that burns on our Advent wreath reminds us that Christ has begun to be present in the world, but that there is still much to do. Let us prepare to meet him, and run forth with righteous deeds at his coming.