

- Oh Lord, as with gladness men of old did the guiding star behold, so most precious lord may we ever more be led to thee, as they offered gifts most rare at that major rude and bear, so may we with holy joy, pure and free from sins alloy, all our costliest treasures bring, priced to thee our heavenly king, amen.

- Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight. Oh, Lord, our strength and our redeemer, amen. Many years ago, almost too many years ago, when I was a student in the economics class in Glasgow university, I read the preface to a textbook in which there was this strange, but sage comment. You will not understand any part of this book until you have read it all and you will not understand it as a whole until you have mastered every part of it. Now that is at one and the same time bewildering nonsense and sound common sense. The understood whole is at least the sum of the comprehended sections. But each section demands a knowledge of the complete volume for a thorough grasp of the sub division. Now this is true not only in the realm of political science, as you are well aware. You could give me examples from history and philosophy and science, it is also axiomatic in religious studies. Particularly in our appreciation of the Christian year. That ecclesiastical calendar, which begins with advent and ends with the late Sundays in trinity or with kingdom tide as the methodists so wisely call the Sundays in trinity. Advent is the lumen by Easter. Easter by trinity Sundays, lent is a forerunner of palm Sunday and Christmas is of the ascension, the story keeps doubling back on itself. Late interpretations are used to illumine early events. Now let me try to make that clear by examining advent, since that is the ecclesiastical season in which we now find ourselves. Advent is the period of four Sundays before Christmas. Advent means simply coming and we normally think of it as referring to the coming of the infant Jesus in Bethlehem. And yet if we study the history of advent and the prayers and Bible readings designated for this season and the sermons preached on it, we shall find three interpretations of the coming of Jesus. Now let's look at them together and then we may perhaps understand why this ceremony's called triple advent. The first interpretation is the simplest, the normal natural one. Advent is the period which readies the mind and the heart of the Christian for the anniversary of the birth of the Christ child in Bethlehem. It's a happy season, a festival. The annual gratitude for the coming into the world of a baby and yet as soon as we say that, we know, that the whole truth has not been spoken. It is not just a birthday, that we prepare for, not even the birthday of a special child, the child is special because of his growth to manhood, which saw his teaching, crucified, resurrected and because of the consequent interpretations of his birth as a most uncommon phenomenon. You see how Christmas runs ahead of itself, crucifixion has to come in, resurrection has to come in and then it pools back into itself, these later events. This is not the celebration of the birthday of a child. This is the festival of the incarnation, that is why the first part of the scripture lesson was the exquisite Lucan story of the annunciation. The appearance of Gabriel to Mary, hail though the heart highly favored, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women for thou has found favor with God, the power of the highest shall overshadow thee, therefore also that holy thing, which shall be born of thee shall be called the son of God. Jesus in his teaching and in his person in what he did and in what was done to him, so astonished, so staggered those who wrote about him. That they did not attempt to explain him in ordinary human terms, but turn to the language of wonder and all to account for him. No human

generation could account for Jesus, they said. For them he was son of God and son of Mary. Now, if it is impossible for us to accept such stories as literally true, it is equally unwise for us to reject them as symbolically absurd. What is the truth, that the birth narratives of Jesus are trying to tell? It is that the advent of Jesus is to be understood theologically, rather than biologically. It is, that in Jesus of Bethlehem and Nazareth God uniquely revealed himself, his character, his intention, above all, his deep concern for man. Jesus unveils God. A mother once told her son, that babies came from God and later she found the boy peering over the cradle of his newborn brother and saying, tell us quickly, before you forget, what is God like? Tell us quickly, before you forget, what is God like? That's what Jesus does, he tells us what God is like, therefore in thankfulness, we celebrate his birthday. In gratitude we make use of advent to prepare ourselves to celebrate his birthday with a proper appreciation. How can we prepare ourselves? By giving some time and some thought to the central truth of the birth in Bethlehem. Namely, that the good intent of God became this child, granted, but how can we do it? Let us read the early chapter of Mathew and look slowly, reflectively, tasting the words, turning over in our minds the idea, that the word of God became flesh and tabernacled among us. For new insights, let us read the chapters in French, German, Spanish, Italian, Latin, Greek, whatever language you are supposed to be mastering. Let's read some of the poetry, that has grown up around Christmas, the better hymns. Rupert Brooks, Mary and Gabriel. G. K. Chesterton's, The House of Christmas. Tomas Hardy's, the Oxen and of course John Milton's hymn on the morning of Christ nativity, let us turn to some of the modern legends, Henry van Dyke's The Story of the Other Wise Man or even the Littlest Angel. Let us catch the flavor of the more than natural, the otherworldly, the invasion of our earth by heaven. Now something like this is the first facet of advent. The preparation for the Bethlehem nativity, which is the festival of the incarnation. There's a second aspect of advent, dependent on it and yet different from it, what is it? It is the readying of ourselves for the entrance of the spirit of Jesus, the revealer of God, into our own hearts. It is the willing acceptance of the living Christ as the inspirer of our lives, isn't that the thought of the second part of the morning lesson, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith? That you may know the love of Christ, which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. What is it that everyone ultimately desires? Isn't it a center of loyalty, which both attracts our allegiance and effects that allegiance and isn't that what the three letters G O D stand for? John Bachen, who was later Lord Tweedsmuir governor of Canada, John Bachen once defined an atheist as a man with no invisible means of support. Now the author of the epistle to the Ephesians points out that there is an invisible means of support to be found, not primarily in Judaism, not primarily in Hellenism, but in teaching and life of Jesus Christ, who by his resurrection has been set loose in the world to take control of the lives of men and women. The strength of advent is not that we prepare to remember a baby, who died as a young man, but that we prepare to receive an everliving and life changing spirit, which is known in the fruit of love. If anyone were to ask us, how do we know the living Christ today, how would we answer? Isn't it, that we see him in the life of another? Who believing, that Jesus Christ reveals God lives his life after him? Or our brethren, doesn't that mean, that if other people are going to see Jesus Christ today, they must see him in us, why not? We were seeing in a fisherman, like Peter and in a tent maker, like Paul. In a statesman, like Lord Shaftesbury, in a soldier, like Robert E. Lee. In a doctor, like Wilfred Grenfel, in a nurse, like Edith Cavel. In a professor like Sir Henry Jones. Christ must be seen in every generation, so that God may be known. And we are supposed to be the people, who let him shine through us. That's necessary for our own soul satisfaction as well as social peace, that's the truth in the stanza, though Christ, a thousand times in Bethlehem be born, if he's not born in thee, thy soul's forlorn. How can we lay hands on that? How do we

discover the everliving Christ? Let us steep ourselves in the sinks. Start by reading a life of Jesus this Christmas, then study the biographies of his followers or even better, sit down with someone, who seems to you to behave as Jesus Christ would if he lived in United States in the 20th century. Brethren we all know folk like that, all of us do. And then we may come to know Jesus and love him for himself, we begin to apprehend the God he reveals, so that we think his thoughts after him and live his life after him. This is commitment. And with commitment comes not imitation, no, reincarnation. Because the really important thing for us and for our fellows is not that we merely remember the incarnation at Christmas, but that we offer ourself for his reincarnation. Isn't that what Paul was getting at, when he wrote to the Galatians, I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I, who live, Christ liveth in me. Something like this is the second facet of advent. The preparation of ourselves for the rebirth of Christ, which is the festival of the reincarnation. I'm fairly sure and I certainly hope, that most of you go with me thus far. But there is a third aspect of the advent season, which seems to be quite different from the other two. It is betokened in the collet for the first Sunday in advent in the book of common prayer, here it is. Almighty God, give us grace, that we may cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light now in the time of this mortal life in which thy son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility, that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead. We may rise to life immortal. Through him, who liveth and reignith with thee and the holy ghost, now and forever, amen. Now notice, this is the collect for the first Sunday in advent and yet its central thought has little to do with the first advent. This concentrates on the second advent, the coming of Jesus in judgment, that the end of the world and of time. Now isn't that a strange way to begin the Christian year? To open the season of preparation for Christmas, be it the festival of incarnation or reincarnation. Do you see now why we must know the end to understand the beginning and the middle to throw light both in what comes before and what follows after? This collet has been prayed on the first Sunday in advent since it was written in 1549. For over 400 years the first Sunday in advent has started with that collet. Now we can't dodge the fact, that the new testament is full of references to the imminent end of the world. That the second coming of Jesus the Lord has been part of the orthodox faith since the early church, though it has been soft petaled for many of us. Our question is, what truth does it have? That this world is going to come to an end is being born in on us to fresh by man's discovery and manipulation of atomic power. How otherwise do you account for the popularity of a novel like Nevil Shoots on the beach? Which even the evening paper in this town is putting into a strip. Whole world has been destroyed except Australia and Australia is waiting to be destroyed. Now how do you behave, when you're waiting to be destroyed? Even the more cursory reading of that book will make you ask, what about the end? Is it a cosmic blackout? Now we may argue, scientifically, whether we shall be burned to a crisp in the sun or frozen stiff in a new ice age. Whether it will all end with a bang or with a whimper? Does religion have anything to say? Particularly does Christianity have anything to say? Well, ignoring the minutiae of the last trump and streets of gold and gates of pearl, which seems awfully hot, dazzling. Our faith does have one thing to say. God will control the end, more than that and this is very important, God will control the end in terms of Jesus. Note well that fact, the judgment, the decision as to our lot, when this present age has passed away will be in terms of Jesus of Bethlehem and Nazareth. It will be in terms of the sermon on the mount. And Easter Sunday, that is the judgment will be in terms of love, love. There is our hope, the hope, that shatters fear and withers dismay, you heard the words in the third part of the scripture lesson, I go to prepare a place for you and if I go, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am, yee may be also. We lived by hope as well as by faith, Napoleon knew, that even in

the political realm, that's why he said, you have already defeated your enemy, when you have taken away his hope of victory. The Jesus, whose birthday we look forward to, the Jesus, whose spirit may be reincarnated in us, that is the person in whom our world will be consummated, therefore be of good cheer. Thanks be to good, who giveth us the victory to our Lord Jesus Christ. So what, you ask? The Christian does not live in dread of the end, be it personal death or cosmic catastrophe, he lives in expectancy of the end. His real citizenship is not here, his citizenship is in heaven, he sits lightly to life, even though he enjoys it and works in love on earth, he knows he's but a stranger here, a pilgrim, a soldier on earth, his home is where his Lord is. Something like this is the strange third facet of advent, the preparation of ourselves for the second coming, the second advent of Jesus, the word of God, whose judgment is love. Now such a triple advent is annoying to the tidy mind, even granted the validity of all three, wouldn't the Christian year have done better to separate them, preparation for the anniversary of the birth of Jesus, no. Preparation for the incarnation and the end some time in kingdom tide. And yet they are understandably intertwined. Because the central motif is the same in all three. Jesus. The incarnate word of God reincarnate in the life of the believer and the Lord of history. Now and always. Who dominates the end. Therefore as you enter into this Christmas season, be of good cheer. Be of good cheer. Let us pray.