

The Futures Market for Advent

Church vocabulary in the (Latin) Middle Ages had two words for the future: FUTURUS and ADVENTUS. FUTURUS designated what lay up ahead in view of what could be extrapolated from the past. This future was to some degree predictable. It had a karma-quality. What you did in the past worked on into the future—for good or ill. You got what you had coming to you.

ADVENTUS signaled something up ahead that arrived from the other direction. Not at all the consequences of the past, this future was an arrival (maybe even an invasion) from up front, from what had not yet happened. FUTURUS is predictable; ADVENTUS not at all.

Small wonder that the early Christian community latched on to ADVENTUS as the word for their future in the light of the Good News. What they had once expected from God—extrapolating in the FUTURUS mode—was not what actually came. Even if some of the clear-eyed ones had a hunch that the deity would arrive enfleshed, none could even imagine what this humanized deity finally did. To have God on the ground in action dishing out FUTURUS pay-backs was not likely to be good news. What God did do in Christ was different. For that there was no precedent. Brand new. A nova.

One apostolic advertisement for ADVENTUS hypes the novelty this way: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart even conceived, that’s what God has coming from the future toward those who trust him.” (I Cor. 2:9) But can anything so never before seen, never before heard, never before conceived be described at all, if it is so radically brand new? Paul answers yes. It’s the Jesus story.

What happened from Bethlehem to the Ascension was ADVENTUS, nothing you could have deduced from preceding human experience. Here’s one way Paul re-words it: In Christ God was doing a balance sheet, settling accounts, you might say, with the share-holders of his world. But God did this by not calculating their trespasses as debits against them. [That would be FUTURUS stuff] The Christ-transaction was ADVENTUS. Here God took the debtors’ liabilities (and their lethal consequences), transferred them over to Christ, and then took Christ’s assets and credited them to the debtors. And Christ, the real loser in this exchange, concurred in the whole transaction! No wonder Paul calls it a New Creation. (II Cor. 5) That’s what ADVENTUS always is. Something you could never have expected.

From what all of us know about balance sheets, is this any way to reconcile accounts? Of course not. But our convictions about balance sheets are deduced from our past experience. Call it Old Creation, where accounts never get settled apart from the debit-credit system. Someone always returns to collect—both in the world of economics or of personal relations. “You owe me one” is the mantra of the regimen of FUTURUS. Our lives in what we call the “real” world make sense only when we use a debit-credit calculus for human relations. But not so for God, the God of Gospel-ADVENTUS.

God also runs the FUTURUS business, of course. God is the paymaster in the “wages of sin” business. But ADVENTUS is different. It’s an alternate offer from the owner. God never compels any of us to live by divine ADVENTUS, but we’re crazy not to, since the only alternative is FUTURUS, which for sinners is always bad news.

Yet if you don't count people's debits and credits, how on earth do you—does God—reconcile the books? Since God's ADVENTUS-offer is itself so crazy, it is worth repeating. "God had his Son, the Christ, take ownership of the debits of us all, and in the transaction transferred to us all this Son's own native credits." (Ibid.) What a deal—our liabilities for his assets! Our frightful FUTURUS for his advantageous ADVENTUS. What a way to run a railroad! Yet in view of who the beneficiaries are, why should we quibble?

So the Good News for Advent lies in the futures market. Which one will we buy into? Sinners, even very moral ones like us Crossings types, are offered an alternate future, an ADVENTUS, a quantum leap beyond the FUTURUS they could expect. The Advent season urges us to expect the unexpected. Expect what otherwise never happens in the Old Creation, Christ's assets-for-debts "fröhlicher Wechsel," (Luther), and in Bob Bertram's lingo, the "Sweet Swap." ADVENTUS is God's own preferred stock offer for human futures. Christ's resurrection is God ratifying the whole business. But the FUTURUS alternative doesn't disappear. It remains a stock option.

No wonder the Bethlehem shepherds were scared stiff on Christmas Eve. Like sinners everywhere, they automatically anticipate debit-credit futures. That holy hullabaloo in the heavens signaled Apocalypse Now for them. It was Judgment Day. When all the lights go on and nothing is secret anymore, our immediate futures—extrapolated from our personal pasts—are not going to be Good News. But surprise, surprise, the angel announces a different future. "In the city of David, for YOU! A Saver for losers." It's an arrival, an ADVENTUS. Something from up front coming toward us from the outside. It's Glad Tidings that overjoys the shepherds' plausible terror, namely, that in the mangered Messiah God's "good and gracious will" is now being "done on our earth as it is in heaven."

How can you run things on earth with such a management system, such weird bookkeeping? Mangered-Messiah-Management? God's own "Triple M?" Yet, if God backs it up—as the unfolding life of the One in the manger will show—then it is too good NOT to be true. And if we are the beneficiaries, then our earthly "gloria!" is the best response to the angel's heavenly one.

And, oh yes, one more thing. In your own Advent waiting this time around, get some practice in settling your own accounts by sweet-swapping (call it "forgiveness"). Take advantage of Advent. See what happens when you transact your own business of living by this Christic-calculus. Folks with whom you settle accounts in this way may well think you're crazy. All the more so if they are committed to cornering the market for their own futures by "trespass-counting." But that's their problem. They are not crazy enough.

For we have it on good authority that sweet-swapping ADVENTUS is the way of God's own future, the one that lasts. The Christ of Advent says we have it coming to us. We have his word for it. That word holds true right in the midst of our own Apocalypse Now. Should you have some doubts—and who wouldn't in the planet-wide debit-credit karma-chaos of our time—read the last book of the New Testament again. In the last battle FUTURUS terminates. ADVENTUS doesn't.

-- Edward H. Schroeder