

Holy Covenant – First Sunday of Advent – 30 November 2014

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Isaiah 64. 1-9; Ps 80; 1 Corinthians 1. 1-9; Mark 13. 24-37

How do you prepare for the radical intersection of divine with human life? How do you get ready for God breaking directly into our world, our experience? The readings and themes set by the church through the season of Advent offer some helpful suggestions – first it's a good idea to wake up, to realise that something or someone is coming who provokes expectancy, hope; then you get ready – you make preparation, with some interior housekeeping (known as repenting your sins) and some exterior, social restoration work, in the form of enacting justice and peace; you wait and listen to the prophets – to those who can see a little further ahead; and then you receive what is being given, you let Mary teach you to say 'yes' and let joy happen.

These movements ritually enacted over the four weeks of Advent outline, of course, the shape of conversion and transformation at any time of the year – the movements of awareness, of letting go and changing course, of deepening attention, listening and waiting, all culminating with obedient and generous acceptance of gift. And understood in this way, the invitation of the Advent season is to let ourselves be drawn once more into a pattern of life that is familiar to us and ever capable of being deepened. We see how it is that Advent frames the beginning of the church's year as an invitation to renewal through openness to encountering the God who comes and is always coming towards us.

Yet here we also approach something of the strangeness, the mystery of the Christmas story. For in the Christian tradition, we do not say simply that this Advent pattern is a structure for giving ourselves to the spiritual journey – although it is. But with the story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, we make the extraordinary claim that the God who calls us into this journey has actually come to us not simply in words

spoken by messengers, not simply as fleeting inspiration, but bodily, historically, as a human life. We say that this God, this Christ, will come again. The prophet Isaiah cried: 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down', and in Christ we proclaim this has happened. Very God has become a human being, heaven has touched earth, eternity has broken into time – and nothing is the same anymore. Yet although we can say these words and play with these paradoxes – I don't think (speaking for myself) that it is at all easy to know what we mean by any of this.

Four times in the gospels' story of Jesus, there is narrated an experience of direct encounter with the action of God, the radical intersection of heaven and earth. It happens in the story of Jesus' conception and birth with reference to angels and a star; at his baptism with a voice and the Spirit of God descending like a 'dove' from the open heaven. It happens at the Transfiguration where Peter, James and John are overwhelmed by the light which suddenly emanates from Jesus's face and clothes, and the voice coming again from heaven; and finally at the resurrection, where angels meet the stricken disciples at the inexplicably open and empty tomb (and here it seems that the openness of the tomb and the openness of heaven might be related). All these encounters seem to happen at the limit of human perception and language and capacity to make sense. Something is experienced, but it is elusive, disorienting, unable really to be caught by existing frameworks of meaning. And that is made clear in the stories by the fact that not everyone who is present sees or hears the same thing, and by the overwhelmed, fragmentary character of the testimony.

Eastern Christian icons of Jesus offer what we may see as almost a photographic 'negative' of these elusive 'positive' images in Scripture. In his beautiful book, *The Dwelling of the Light*, Rowan Williams comments on how icons of Jesus often depict him against a dark background. This background is a way of representing the immeasurable depths of the heavenly reality from which Jesus comes out;

‘behind or within him infinity opens up’.¹ That infinite reality remains in itself unknowable – we glimpse it only in the light of Jesus’s appearing. Which brings us back to the Christmas story, and the question of what, really, it means to say that God’s infinite life has broken into our life.

For one thing, it suggests that our world is not self-enclosed and not finally able to be ‘taped’ by us. Williams says: the fact of Jesus’s humanity means ‘there is a solid portion of our world, the world of matter and time, which is radically open to God: the fact of Jesus’ history, part of our history, is a doorway into the endlessness of God’s life and resource. To recognize this is to recognize that the world of matter and time is not finally and authoritatively closed on itself; the boundaries are unsettled’. In other words, if Jesus’s witnesses glimpse him coming out of that ‘dark background’, an infinity which encompasses our reality and is now internal to it, then our ‘environment becomes charged with possibilities we don’t know about’.² This is the ground of hope – understood not so much as the wish that things were different, but as radical openness to newness, surprise, and the infinite creativity of God.

And if our world is rightly seen only against the background of this infinite reality, then it suggests that our lives are created for, able to be deepened and transfigured by our openness to this depth, this life. As Athanasius famously expressed it, ‘God became human so that we might become God’, ‘all of us, with unveiled faces ... being transformed (as St Paul writes) ... from one degree of glory to another’ (2 Cor. 3.18). What does this divinity, this glory look like? It looks like Jesus, whose human life was ‘sustained from the depths of God without interruption and without obstacle’, and was remembered for its freedom to be, its hospitality to all, its power to nourish and heal. ‘Belief in Jesus (says Williams) is seeing him as the gateway to an endless journey into God’s love’.

¹ *The Dwelling of the Light*, pp.4-5.

² Williams, *Dwelling of the Light*, p.14.

None of this means that anguish and death, the experience at times of the pointlessness of our lives and our struggles, is just magicked away. The coming of Jesus is not about fixing the world, but opening it from within to the infinite depth of divine life and love which somehow does enable us to be with our sufferings and perplexities differently, in the light of possibility and with some degree of hope.

This is not a testimony, these are not truths that can be grasped discursively, grabbed hold of by our rational minds and limited imaginations. They can be apprehended only contemplatively, patiently over time, as our sensibilities are themselves changed by their exposure to the infinite reality we seek to know. And that is why we prepare for Christmas with a season of prayer, of watching and waiting, pondering (as Mary did) all these things in our hearts – so that when he comes we may be ready to greet him.

There are different ways we might do this – we might pray with icons, we might follow a practice of lectio divina with the stories of Christmas or other gospel stories, or we might practise a prayer of silent meditation – seeking simply to be open to that infinite life, letting ourselves be drawn into a deeper contemplation of the mystery of Advent and Christmas. In these and other ways, we practise constant openness to Christ's appearing and readiness to receive him, however unlikely a form he might take, however unexpected the hour.