

A Contemplative Christmas – Awakening (Matthew 24.36-44)

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We flew back into Sydney from our Camino journey on 1 November, and as we left the terminal building, I saw a giant, artificial and garishly decorated Christmas tree on the concourse outside. My heart sank – and not only because of the prospect of Christmas shopping! It looked so ugly and tacky, the tinsel faded and somehow forlorn in the bright sunshine – like the lights of a nightclub left on by mistake during the day. It was a stark reminder of how difficult it is to ‘do’ Christmas in Australia – the weather is all wrong for the symbolism, and the symbolism has in any case virtually ceased to speak. And I wondered how it could be possible to prepare for and celebrate Christmas with integrity, with real beauty and simplicity and some live sense of its meaning.

There’s another thing that makes the liturgical celebration of Christmas difficult for us. It’s that, if we haven’t already left, many of us go on holidays straight after Christmas Day. But the Feast of Christmas is not just a day – it is a season that extends for 10 days after the 25th of December. And more and more I sense that we cannot snatch the gift of Christmas in a day, but that we must receive it over a season. So – what to do at Benedictus? I contemplated the possibility of committing to a week of daily services post-Christmas – but that thought ran aground not only the prospect that few of you would be here, but also that I myself wanted to visit relatives that week!

Maybe one year we will do the Christmas season in ‘real’ liturgical time. But this year, I thought we might at least begin to explore what that could look like, with a series over the next four weeks called A Contemplative Christmas. Over this time, we will mark

Advent and the season of preparation, but we will also get a little ahead of ourselves, so that we can celebrate Christ's birth together and experience its aftermath, in the fright and violence directed to him from the beginning. For it is, in part, that reaction which teaches us more deeply what this birth will mean. Today, we begin our series with the traditional Advent exhortation – to wake up.

Toward the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, as the gospels portray it, we hear from him a tone of increasing frustration and urgency. The time is short – the forces of expulsion are arraying against him, and still no one gets it. Like the people in Noah's day who were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, knowing nothing until the flood came and swept them away, they are sleepwalking towards disaster. A crisis is upon them, the very judgement of God, and they fail to read the signs. They risk being found unready and unprepared in their fields and kitchens, like foolish bridesmaids or unfaithful servants, like the householder whom the thief surprises in the middle of the night.

At the heart of all the great spiritual traditions is the exhortation to wake up, to become conscious, to attend to what is really going on. At the heart of all the great spiritual traditions is the recognition that wakefulness is not our natural state and that something in us actively resists and avoids facing reality. And if God is what is ultimately real, then that means that there is something in us that actively resists and avoids God. Judgement is the moment when reality can no longer be avoided; it is when we discover who we are and what kind of life we have been living all along – like when a brush with illness alerts me to an unhealthy lifestyle, or when an increase in weather events finally wakes us up to the ominous signs of climate change.

For many of us, though, a troubling feature of these exhortations to wakefulness in the gospels is that they apparently take the form of threat. It's a 'wake up, or else' kind of discourse, which ties judgement to the threat of punishment. It seems radically

inconsistent with the fact that when God in the person of Jesus *does* appear among us it is as a vulnerable child, as a friend and healer, as the crucified and forgiving victim of our violence. Some read this seeming biblical connection between judgement and punishment as saying that God gives us lots of chances, but in the end, for those who persist in their 'disobedience', there is a casting into outer darkness, wailing and gnashing of teeth. And certainly, there are scriptures that can be quoted in support of such a reading. I find more convincing the argument of theologian James Alison that the gospels' preaching of judgement and their exhortation to wakefulness take over a pre-existing apocalyptic terminology, but that they are beginning to reflect a radically new understanding.

For it is true that the call to wake up *does* feel, often enough, accompanied by threat. But I do not believe that the threat comes from God, or that Jesus has anything to do with the punishing God of humanity's infantile imaginings. The sense of threat comes from within us and from each another. Because to wake up, in the gospels, to get real, just means to turn towards and participate in God's reality, God's light-shedding, truth-telling, reconciling way of being in the world. And the problem is, as T.S. Eliot famously said, that 'human beings cannot bear very much reality'. We are mostly profoundly invested in the half-truths that seem to make life a bit easier. To face up to reality, to the fact that our economic system, our exploitation of the natural world, some of our relationships and perhaps even our picture of ourselves may be at least partly mired in illusion, is profoundly confronting (for us and for others). Much better to stay asleep, to eat and drink, and hope that the world as we know it keeps going long enough to secure my superannuation, my reputation as a 'good guy' or a team player, or whatever it is that I or we don't want to let go. But Jesus won't let us get away with that.

And this call to wake up, in the gospels, is immediate, always now. There is no time that is outside of God's insistence that we 'get real'. So Jesus' refusal to specify a

particular time 'when' judgement will happen is I think best understood, not as a controlling attempt to keep the disciples on tenterhooks about some threatened future, but to draw them into a state of perpetual wakefulness, a radical commitment to attentiveness: 'you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour'.

Advent always begins with the call to wake up and so with the promise of judgement. It begins with the reminder that we are accountable for our relationship to reality, and that any capacity we have to receive and recognise God's presence among us is inextricably connected to our capacity to tell the truth, to let go of comforting illusions, and self-serving complacency. We cannot simply take these capacities in us for granted – somehow we must cooperate with them, nourish them, help them to grow and deepen. This is the work of our whole life and it sometimes involves painful growth phases, where because of external circumstances or internal shifts or some combination of the two, we need to grow out of an outworn, no longer truthful way of seeing or being in the world. This can happen as part of the process of ageing; in the loss of a relationship or loved one or of energy for our work; it can manifest as an experience of losing God or losing ourselves. Waking up, getting real, is often not comfortable or easy – which perhaps explains something of the tone of Jesus's words in our gospel reading.

How do we engage this work of waking up and deepening our capacity for reality? How do we sustain our faith in it during times of suffering, new growth and confusion? We simply come into the presence of what is ultimately real, the presence of God and we consent to have our unreality exposed and revealed for what it is. In the language of the Christmas season, we bring our darkness to God's light and this light gradually illuminates our lives, and causes us to shine. How do we do that? Our way is the way of silent, contemplative prayer.