

Repentance (Luke 3: 7-18)*Advent 3*

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I want to begin this week's reflection, somewhat uncharacteristically, by quoting the pope. Not the current pope Francis, but the one before him – Pope Benedict XVI. In a homily in the first week of Advent in 2006, Benedict spoke of the way the Advent liturgy 'invites the Church to renew her proclamation to all the people and sums it up in two words, "God comes". These words [he says], so concise, contain an ever new evocative power'. What is this power? Well, he goes on, 'Let us pause a moment to reflect: it is not used in the past tense – God has come, nor in the future – God will come, but in the present – "God comes"'. The form of the verb is 'a continuous present ... an ever-continuous action: it happened, it is happening now and it will happen again. In whatever moment, "God comes"' which means – Benedict suggested – that this proclamation 'says something about God's very nature'. God is the God who comes, and Advent 'calls believers to become aware of this truth and to act accordingly. It rings out as a salutary appeal in the days, weeks and months that repeat: Awaken! Remember that God comes! Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today, now!'¹

I find this reflection itself deeply evocative. It brings to the fore what you might call the temporal ambivalence, the temporal bendiness of the Advent season which speaks simultaneously of preparing for a birth that happened over two thousand years ago, preparing for a coming at the end of time, and preparing to open our hearts to receive Christ's coming today. Since our culture tends to think literally and in terms of linear time, this can feel confusing. But what's being imagined here and symbolically communicated is the possibility of entering into a

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, 'Homily of First Vespers of the First Sunday of Advent', 2 December 2006 (<http://www.appleseeds.org/christmas-quotes.htm>).

whole way of being towards God. The possibility of this way of being *is* connected to particular historical events, particular past experiences of preparation, waiting and arriving – and yet it’s also always unfolding, always ahead of us. ‘Advent means literally a “coming towards”’ and, says Laurence Freeman, ‘This is spatial imagery used to describe a spiritual event unlimited by space or time but still happening in human geography and real time’.²

So it is with our reading tonight. The proclamation of John the Baptist is remembered as preparing the way for the appearance on the public stage of Jesus of Nazareth in first century Judea, while being simultaneously a proclamation addressed to us that we too might prepare God’s way. There’s something deeply involving and important here, I think, and yet two features of this call may seem problematic.

One is the issue of the ever-repeating pattern of preparation and waiting. Irish priest and theologian Diarmuid O’Murchu complains that if the people of God are meant to be in a state of continuous waiting for God, ‘this suggests that we humans never stand a chance of getting it right’.³ To be in a state of continuous waiting is, in his view, infantilising. ‘We are always waiting for further divine intervention, a kind of religious co-dependency that makes us passive, insecure, ambivalent and childlike’.⁴ Rather than getting on with participating, co-labouring in the building of the kingdom, this notion of Advent encourages us to spend our time obsessing over our readiness – never quite sure we’ve done enough or when the time will be fulfilled. A few years ago, I was given a mug with a picture of Jesus descending on a cloud accompanied by the caption, ‘Look busy, Jesus is coming’. That sentiment is at least akin to the mindset O’Murchu is concerned about!

Well, it’s certainly possible to relate to the language of waiting, preparing for God’s coming in this way, but I don’t think we’re forced to. Remember, as Pope Benedict expresses it, what’s at issue here is a continuous present – God is the God

² Laurence Freeman, ‘Reflection – Second Week of Advent 2018’, www.wccm.org

³ Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Incarnation: A New Evolutionary Threshold* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), p.191.

⁴ O’Murchu, *Incarnation*, p.191.

who comes. Which means God is (so to speak) always moving towards us, always seeking to encounter us more fully. God coming is the reality in which we live and move and have our being. And although we mark certain breakthrough moments in the fullness of this coming (the Spirit speaking through the prophets, the birth of Christ) we can understand these moments not primarily as extraordinary 'interventions' but as more realised revelations of the nature of things. This is the truth, Benedict says, that we're called to become aware of and so 'act accordingly'.

What does it mean to act in accord with this truth? It means waking up to it, and becoming ready. Or, as John the Baptist exhorts us, it means repenting of our sins. But this seems to lead to a second problematic feature of the Advent dynamic, which is that if we're called to be continuously preparing to meet the God who comes, doesn't that imply a state of continuous repentance? And doesn't that run the risk of drawing us into hyper-vigilant, religiously obsessive patterns of behaviour, forever scrutinising our consciences, confessing our faults, feeling ourselves perpetually unworthy, miserable rotten sinners? Well again, it's certainly possible to relate to the call to repent in these ways, as the history of our tradition amply demonstrates. But this doesn't seem to be quite what John the Baptist had in mind.

In reply to the crowds asking him what they needed to do to prepare the way of the Lord, he said simply this: 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise'. Those of you who are tax collectors must collect no more than the amount prescribed, and those of you who are soldiers are not to extort money by threats or false accusations. The call to repent, in other words, is a call to live justly, generously, in solidarity. It's to see oneself as with others and part of a whole.

To be sure, this isn't easy. To live this way requires giving up attempts to grasp at security maintained at others' expense. It involves the willingness to trust one's life to something other than that. In the short term, the experience of living like this may involve a loss of security, of control, and even self-determination. If I think of how Australia and other 'fossil fuel' nations behaved at the climate conference in

Poland this past week – how they flat out refused to see themselves as ‘with others and part of a whole’ – we see how difficult repentance can be, how strenuously we can resist. Almost none of us manages it in a single go, or completely.

But ultimately, can you feel how this invitation is actually a relief, how it creates space within and around us? As we let go clinging to what we have – whether it’s a sense of our own entitlement or more possessions than we need – we find ourselves less and less run by rivalry, by the need to assert or defend ourselves, by the compulsion to compete for space in the world. We start to become aware of and open to a reality far larger than what we can possess on our own terms – the abundance and irrepressible fecundity of God that can raise up children to Abraham even from these stones. For John the Baptist, repentance, *metanoia*, isn’t fundamentally about the scrupulous confession of moral fault; it’s a complete transformation of our grasping and defended habits of being. And this is how it makes room for God, prepares the way. It’s how we become receptive to grace, gift.

So when the season of Advent proclaims the necessity of continuously preparing for and waiting on God, it’s not because God isn’t here already, already at work within and among us. And when it renews the call to repent, it’s not because we’ve never done that and never sought to make ourselves ready. It’s just that God is the God whose nature is to come, who longs to give God’s self, to overflow our bounds. And that means that God longs for us to expand our capacity to receive this gift. God never stops thinking of us, said Pope Benedict: ‘he wants to come, to dwell among us, to stay with us. His “coming” is motivated by the desire to free us from evil and death, from all that prevents our true happiness’.⁵ And that’s why, despite the Baptist’s rather forbidding packaging, news of God’s coming is ‘good news’. It’s why the fruits of repentance are blessing for the world.

⁵ Benedict XVI, ‘Homily’.