

Come, Let Us Go Up (Isaiah 2: 1-5)

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I want to start by sharing the threads I'm trying to weave together over the coming weeks in a way that will shape and (I hope) empower our Advent journey as a community.

The first thread is to do with my sense of Advent as a distinct theological category and call – a way of imagining how the world is and what it asks of us in response. More and more I sense there's a particular kind of spiritual work identified by this season, which our tradition sees as necessary for life's transformation. I'd like us to get clearer about the nature of this work. The second thread connects us to the prophet Isaiah, who is traditionally read at this time of year. Isaiah has profoundly shaped the church's interpretation of the meaning of Christmas, and is pre-eminently a prophet of advent. I'm interested in what will be yielded for us by approaching Christmas in his company. And finally, the third thread is to do with our contemporary context and experience – a wondering how our Advent journey this year might connect with the needs of our world. I thought that if I said a bit to introduce each of these threads, that might be enough to be getting on with for this week!

So first, Advent as a distinct theological category and call. The word 'advent' means simply 'coming'. Traditionally Advent is the season in which Christians prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus to Bethlehem, and proclaim that this same Jesus will come again, will be revealed at the end time as the meaning and judge of it all. The images connected with these two comings – the child in the manger, the exalted Lord trailing clouds of glory – we may find more or less plausible. But what I find exciting about the whole idea of Advent, of God 'coming', is that it understands the world to be not a closed system. Advent is about in-breaking; it's the arrival of

goodness and life from beyond. Advent speaks of happenings that are not traceable purely to material causes, the unfolding of pre-existing processes. The whole notion signifies surprise, newness – it's experienced as gift, grace.

Do you know this experience – this sense of something coming at you, from beyond? I've felt it a few times in my life, including in connection with our move here, to St Ninian's. For several years, as you know, Benedictus had been exploring the idea of 'home', a centre for contemplative spirituality. But it wasn't obvious how that could ever come about – we had little money, no institutional backing. But we held ourselves open and one day, as if out of the blue, there came a phone call. An invitation to a conversation from a direction we'd never imagined. It felt like gift, grace, a rupture in the system – an in-breaking of possibility.

Now, of course, it would be entirely possible to interpret that phone call without making use of the category of Advent at all. The story of how we came to be here could be told as a tale of two church communities perceiving mutual advantage in a cooperative arrangement, with someone deciding to broker the deal. No mystery, no 'God' – just life unfolding. You could tell the story of Jesus in the same spirit. A child is born in Palestine in the first century; he responds in a particular way to the texts of his tradition and the politics of his time, gathers a band of followers, falls foul of the authorities and is killed. Jesus, on this account, might be known as a teacher, charismatic leader, maybe even a zealot; but he's not 'from God' (in any distinctive way), he hasn't 'come', nothing has 'broken in' from elsewhere.

This is what I mean by saying that Advent is a theological category. It offers a way of reading the world, interpreting what happens as a matter of gift and promise. You can't straightforwardly prove this reading to a sceptic; to see things this way, in this light, is already to read events with the eye of faith. It's to have begun to relate to the whole of life expectantly, trusting the availability of grace, goodness, the coming towards us of God. Why should we take such a view of things seriously? How might it matter? Well – that's what I want us to explore.

Perhaps more than any of the prophets of Israel, Isaiah is profoundly formed by this Advent sensibility, this expectancy. The early Christians read him as specifically prefiguring the birth of Christ – and it's his images that overwhelmingly shape our Christmas liturgies and music. 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel' (Isa. 7:14); 'For to us a child is born; to us a son is given; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' (Isa. 9:6). All this is from Isaiah, along with most of the rest of the libretto of Handel's *Messiah*! St Jerome, the 4th century church father and biblical translator said that Isaiah 'should be called an evangelist rather than a prophet because he describes all the mysteries of Christ and the Church so clearly that you would think he is composing a history of what has already happened rather than prophesying about what is to come'.¹ For this reason, the book of Isaiah has sometimes been called 'a Fifth gospel'.²

More recent commentators have shied away from this Christian co-option of Isaiah, noting the importance of reading the book in its own historical context. The prophet himself lived in the 8th century BCE, and the text that bears his name tells a story of Israel's life over a centuries long period, a story of invasion, exile and return as Israel seeks to survive amidst the imperial ambitions of the surrounding peoples of Assyria, Babylon and Persia.³ It is thus, says scholar Walter Brueggemann, 'a matter of considerable importance ... that Christians should not pre-empt the book of Isaiah', looking only for meaning that suits a Christian agenda and neglecting its significance for Jewish history and self-understanding.

Having said this, it seems to me that characterising Isaiah as a prophet of advent need not involve attributing to him anachronistic foreknowledge of Jesus' birth. It's simply to recognise that in his recurring promise that God will act and that newness is possible, he speaks a language of 'in-breaking', of 'coming', which

¹ John F. A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.2.

² Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel*, p.6.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p.2.

resonated with subsequent generations' experience of the meaning of Christ.

The reading we heard earlier is a case in point. The book of Isaiah opens with words of judgement, the prophetic announcement of Israel's destruction on account of its rebellion against God, its oppression of the needy and the land. 'Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth: for the Lord has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me'. Because of this, and unless there is a change of heart, the prophet says, 'you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water' (Isa. 1: 30). And yet, all is not lost. Within a couple of verses, Isaiah has seen something else, the possibility of life and faith renewed: 'In days to come, the mountains of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and ... all the nations shall stream to it'.

Again and again, this is the pattern of Isaiah's proclamation. He preaches to those whose unsustainable lifestyle is leading to their destruction, and to a people who find themselves shattered in exile. He doesn't gild the lily; he doesn't deny the likely consequences of their injustice or the depth of their suffering. And yet, despite what looks like a totally doomed situation, Isaiah stubbornly testifies that even where hope seemed defeated, something is being given; when all seemed lost, behold – there is yet life. As ancient empires conspire, more or less continuously, to destroy each other, his advent imagination can conceive of God bringing about a complete transformation of heart: 'they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more'.

And this brings me, finally, to our context – and the third thread I want to introduce this evening. Like the people of Israel to whom Isaiah proclaimed the word of the Lord, we too are faced with what looks like an unstoppable movement towards destruction, fuelled by intransigently closed hearts. Scientists warn ever more urgently of the imminence of climate catastrophe, but are ignored by our leaders. Nations lift up nuclear weapons and cyber-intelligence against nations, and the futility of empire building goes on. Injustice suffered by those on Newstart and

disability pensions, and the corruption of major institutions, speak of deep misalignment in our society's priorities and values. In facing up to all this, there are lots of things we ourselves know to do – and many are already doing it. We know we must tell the truth, and keep telling it; we must refuse to go along with injustice or conspire in others' diminishment; we must raise consciousness – our own and others – about the real consequences of our actions, and so on.

But it seems to me that the proclamation of Advent, the proclamation of Isaiah, invites us to be aware of something else going on as well. For Advent suggests that something other than lies directly in our power is also present, available. There is some other resource we are to look for and prepare the way for. Where all seems lost and we find ourselves stuck, not knowing how to continue or break through, we are promised the in-breaking of grace, the coming towards us of unanticipated goodness and life. We speak, during the Advent season, about the necessity of waiting, expecting, looking, hoping. And I wonder – what if we were to understand this as part of the spiritual work called for by our times? This isn't a call to passivity – refusing responsibility for acting. Quite the contrary. True advent expectancy requires intentionality and focus, the radical purification of our longing and our love. But what if we really believed that this work of faithful waiting and looking, this holding open the space of possibility, was actually effective in and for the life of the world?

I know this suggestion needs more unpacking. In coming weeks, it will lead us to explore the power of promise, the texture of hope and the nature of divine action. For now, though, as we begin our Advent journey together, I invite you to imagine that part of the mystery of this season is its insistence that life's transformation by the in-breaking of grace calls (at some mysterious level) for our participation, our willingness to hold open space for the coming, to make ourselves vulnerable to promise. And if that's so, then it should cause us to take very seriously indeed the words of Isaiah: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that God may teach us his ways and that we may walk in God's paths'.