

Here Is Your God (Isaiah 35: 1-10)

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We continue our Advent journey with yet another poetic masterpiece from the mouth of the prophet Isaiah. Neil recently heard someone describe these Advent readings as 'Isaiah's greatest hits' – and it really does feel like that. Track after track of inspired utterance, a compelling vision of the world as it's created to be in the mind of God. 'The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom ...'.

Once again, in tonight's reading, the basic dynamic of Isaiah's proclamation is on glorious display. In the midst of judgement, there is yet hope; from the painful experience of being held accountable for injustice and faithlessness, there will come new possibilities; and from seemingly terminal desolation, God's gift of peace and well-being, a lasting shalom, will be wrought. 'And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away'.

This vision of how God wills to be towards God's people – liberating, restoring, joy bringing – profoundly informed Jesus' self-understanding. The reading from the gospel of Matthew set for today, for example, tells of John the Baptist sending word from prison, asking Jesus whether he is the redeemer promised by God through the prophets: 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' And Jesus is said to reply, in the very words of Isaiah: 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them'. Isaiah was concerned that God's people become capable of recognising God's coming and action among them. 'On that day', Isaiah had said, 'the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples'. Eight centuries later, Jesus declared that the day has come. *This is the day; here is your God; the kingdom is at hand.*

Well, so far in our Advent reflections, we've focused on two main themes. One is this notion of God's promised coming, God's breaking in to transform the world's possibilities in fundamental ways. And the second concerns the necessity of trusting this promise, waiting on God, holding open space for the possibility, so as to be capable of recognising and participating in it. I said last week you can see how these themes show up in the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth – thinking of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna. They're likewise at the heart of contemplative spirituality. We talk all the time about the importance of listening, waiting, watching for what lies just beyond our ken – remaining open to grace coming towards us to surprise and transform us.

Tonight, I'd like to continue exploring these themes – but this time pressing a little harder theologically. Because I'm concerned about how this talk of God coming, and of waiting on God, connects with our lived experience and the travails of the real world. Many of us, I imagine, feel squeamish about certain ways of conceiving divine action. I do, anyway. I find myself cringing when people talk too confidently about God as if 'He' (it is usually a 'he') intervenes directly to affect events, such that 'he' will act to heal the sick or rescue us from difficulty or bring us blessing, if only we pray hard enough. That seems a kind of magical thinking – primitive religiosity. But if I don't like this way of speaking, then what *do I* really mean with my Advent talk of God 'coming', God breaking-in, God doing 'a new thing'? If I refuse a crudely interventionist picture, then what does this all amount to? Is it just poetic redescription of the fact that sometimes things change for the better? Or is there more to it than that?

This is a question that may trouble some of us more than others. But I think it's important that all of us have at least some way of imagining divine action that coheres with our general understanding of the way the world works. Because if we don't, then the language of faith becomes increasingly disconnected from the way we live and how we believe, deep down, things are. The expectancy of Advent becomes just a form of play acting, the vestige of a lost world.

So here's the basic question. How does God 'act'? Assuming we take seriously the independence and integrity of creation, the laws of physics and biology, assuming God isn't just showing up now and then to make running repairs according to some inscrutable divine will, then what does talk of God's 'in-breaking' amount to? And, how does this affect what it means to pray, 'Come Lord' or to 'wait' on God? As you can imagine, there's a vast amount of theological ink spilt around all this. And we need to bear in mind that any way we talk about it, we're still in the realm of metaphor, image, analogy. But, here's what I've found helpful – three touchstones.

First, God is not like anything else. Whatever we mean by God's agency, we don't mean just a bigger, more powerful version of our agency. As Rowan Williams has said: 'If God is truly the source ... of every limited, finite state of affairs, if God is the action or agency that makes everything else active, then God cannot be spoken of as one item ... active in the world'.¹ In other words, if God is the source of all that is, then God cannot just be another thing in the universe – competing for space, displacing the stuff of the world. Finite and infinite operate on different planes.

This means, second, that God's action cannot interrupt created, finite causality. God underpins *all* the working of creation as the ground of being, but does not replace or directly supplement the working of creation in particular instances. If it were otherwise, then we'd be imagining a god like the Greek gods, who shows up from time to time as a finite agent interfering *within* the world, rather than as the infinite source of all that is and moves. So whatever we mean, when we talk about God coming at Christmas, the in-breaking of Advent, we can't mean that God showed up in this way.

So what could we mean? Well, this is the crux of things. Let's go back to the kind of agent God is. In the tradition of theological understanding I'm drawing from, God is conceived as intending creation, speaking it into independent being; this is no automatic process but an expression of personal will, love and intelligence to which God freely and wholly gives God's self. But here's the thing. We too, through the gift

¹ Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), p.xii.

of personal will, possess something of this God-like capacity to be fully 'in' our action, intentional, aware, given over. And this suggests that there's the possibility of relation at this level between human and divine will, between finite and infinite.

The insight of faith is that where this relationship is activated, where human will opens itself and is united to the divine, then human being and agency is transformed. On this vision, the finite, human world is not closed in on itself. Indeed, when human intelligence and love are rooted in divine action, then 'finite agencies may bring about effects greater than the sum of their parts'; in Williams' words, finite agency 'is open to possibilities in excess of its own immanent and predictable capacities' such that something genuinely new becomes possible.² This isn't God over-riding the independent life and freedom of creation, but reflects a heightened transparency of creaturely life to divine communication.³

The people and prophets of Israel understood this possibility, though of course (as all human beings do) they struggled to remain faithful to it. Often they forgot or got distracted, and so (in Isaiah's imagery) they became blind and deaf, unavailable for the depth dimension of things. This is why the prophets keep calling them back to wakefulness, attention, and why Isaiah yearned for the day when the people would be restored as *God's* people. And this is how the early church understood the restoration effected because of Jesus. In him, the openness of human to divine life was fully realised, so that in relationship with him, all people may come to share the same transparency.

As for what this means in daily life – well. For me, it helps me conceive our vocation as essentially to do with tuning in and making space for God in and around us, *making way* rather than getting *in the way*. It helps me remember that God acts in and through the material world – through conversations, meetings, imaginations, hearts and communities that are oriented and open to what lies beyond them. Which means that when we pray at Advent that God may 'come', when we say we're

² Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, p.3.

³ This is known as the 'double-agency' tradition. See also Scott Cowdell, *René Girard and the Nonviolent God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), pp.134-138.

‘waiting’ on God, it’s not because God is currently absent or unavailable, and we’re hoping God comes back. Nor is it that we’re hoping for some large scale intervention from the outside, that will pluck us out of our lives, out of history. No – what we’re doing is orienting ourselves towards God’s infinite and eternal act, God’s goodness and grace, creating receptivity such that ‘when the time is fulfilled’, ‘when there is sufficient readiness’, the spring of life may bubble again to the surface, become manifest in ways that change possibilities, bring streams to the desert and pools to the burning sand.

At the beginning of Advent I spoke of the distinctive spiritual work of this season. Here, I think, we see the nature of this work more clearly. Our participation is part of God’s action to create and liberate being more fully realised, not just because (as the familiar prayer goes) God has no hands and feet but ours, but because our desire, our consent, our availability is part of opening space where other energies may flow, connections be made, and newness happen. And in this spirit, we pray, Maranatha – come Lord Jesus.