

Light Coming (John 1. 6-9, 19-34)

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Advent is traditionally understood as a season of impending crisis. Crisis in the sense of point of decision, turning point, before and after. The gospels portray the coming of Jesus as a decisive break with what has been. In her poem, 'BC:AD', Ursula Fanthorpe expresses this brilliantly:

This was the moment when Before
Turned into After, and the future's
Uninvented timekeepers presented arms.

This doesn't mean Jesus comes from nowhere. He can only be understood in the light of the long story of God's relationship with Israel. His meaning is communicated by way of a symbol system that pre-dates him by centuries. Nevertheless, the testimony of the Christian scriptures is that with his advent, something new is breaking in upon the world. And a key question for the gospel writers is what makes it possible to recognise this moment? After all, if Jesus means what they think he means, and fulfils what they think he fulfils, how is it that some don't see it? Hence their emphasis on people having eyes to see and ears to hear, their concern with discerning the signs of the times, and their insight that this involves the capacity to suspend certainty and trust a new way of knowing.

Well, there's a sense in which this season of Advent – its embrace of crisis and the receptivity it encourages towards the unknown and the new – is good training for contemporary life. We seem to be undergoing a prolonged crisis in relation to pretty much every facet of our existence – ecological, political, economic, social, ecclesial and for some of us personal. The pandemic has just helped to heighten it all, the icing on the cake. We too are being asked to discern the signs of the times, to open towards a future we cannot really imagine, to give up old certainties.

But there's a weariness that comes with this. I'm conscious of it myself and Richard touched on it last week. A couple of days ago, I read something written by a young woman about the radical uncertainty of the future awaiting her. 'It's exhausting being young', she said.¹ And it's not just the young. I don't have her uncertainty about career and employment, but I too feel weary of a world teetering on the brink, of a church whose place and role is so unclear. I even feel tired at the thought of encouraging myself or you to keep being open to the promise of the new, to be available for what's unfolding in our midst ... all the while being patient with unknowing, persevering in the face of resistance, reaction, and inertia. I just want some stuff to get sorted.

If we're being mature, we know that, spiritually speaking, our calling is to remain ever-expectant and trusting in the face of unresolvedness. But emotionally, it can be exhausting. And this is where I wonder if there's some wisdom and resource to be had from our reading tonight, and from the witness of John the Baptist in particular. I wonder what in his way of being might offer something for our living fruitfully and sustainably in a time of crisis, responsive to the coming and action of God in our midst.

The first thing that strikes me about John is that he's someone whose life is determined by events that are always beyond him, that always exceed him. This is actually true for all of us, but while we might expend a lot of energy in the quest for self-determination, self-importance and control, John seems to embrace the fact that his life is not essentially for or about him. He is uncluttered by self-concern which means there is clarity in him. Clarity about who he is and isn't. 'I am not the Messiah' (and I don't need to be); 'I am not Elijah' (and I'm not aspiring to that). I am not the light, nor am I rushing around trying to become the light. I am simply faithful to my part – 'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness'.

¹ Michelle Lim, 'I feeling like I'm fighting for my future. It's exhausting being young'. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/dec/08/i-feel-like-im-fighting-for-my-future-its-exhausting-being-young> (accessed 10 December 2020).

If I think about what makes me weary in the face of crisis, it's often to do with having become so worried about the whole of it, that I lose sight of what is mine to do and be, here and now, in this moment and place. Given the commitments I have, given my gifts and limits and circumstances, given my best discernment of what I'm called to – what is required of me? Achieving clarity on this question is itself a significant spiritual task. And when there's much to be done, much to be solved, it can seem almost *irresponsible* to confine yourself to your own part in things. But ultimately, I think, this is the only true *responsibility*; and it's such a relief to realise it. This is a place you can *be* at rest, no matter how hard or uncertain or overwhelming the time.

Achieving this kind of clarity doesn't mean we're then assured of where it's all heading. While John knows who he is and what his role, he doesn't know what it's ultimately about or what its fulfilment will look like. But he's OK with that. Whereas the religious authorities insist on pre-established criteria for evaluating truth and effectiveness, John entrusts himself to a different kind of knowing – the knowing of the heart. In his poem, 'The Quickening of John the Baptist', Thomas Merton writes of the moment John is said to leap in the womb of his mother Elizabeth, when she's visited by a pregnant Mary. Merton speaks of 'the wise, wild baby, The unborn John who could not see a thing'. Nothing much changes for this wise, wild baby, who remains compelled his whole life to testify to that which he has not yet seen.

There is risk in relying on this kind of heart-knowing, this knowledge beyond knowledge. It looks suspiciously like that nutter element in religion which supposedly just 'knows' that God is doing this or that. But true heart-knowing is not nutty; it's neither uncritical nor irrational. It's a different kind of intelligence and attunement to things – born of non-grasping attention and humility. Our tradition holds that we dwell in a world where light does dawn in the darkness, where truth is revealed and a deeper intelligibility may be found by those who seek it. And it seems to me that in times of crisis in particular, our task, like John's, is to cultivate the capacity of the heart's knowing, to expand our intelligence, tuning in at the level of the Spirit. This

capacity is connected to prayer and silence, and strangely, the more we give our attention to it, the less wearied we are by the unresolvedness of things. For in this work we're not just waiting in a vacuum for what doesn't come, waiting frustrated and impotent; rather, this is waiting that is itself a connection to that upon which we wait – helping to create the conditions of its appearing.

And finally, what strikes me about the witness of John the Baptist is that – in the end – the resolution of his waiting and watching comes with surprising gentleness. Any major crisis – personal, social, religious – involves a degree of turbulence, confusion, anxiety. There's sound and fury as an old order is disrupted and a new one strains to come into being. In the gospels, the coming of the Son of Man is understood to be surrounded by agitation in the heavens and upon the earth. Yet Jesus is said specifically to warn against identifying God *with* the agitation – 'if anyone says to you at that time, "Look, Here is the Messiah!" or "Look, There he is!" – do not believe it' (Mark 13.21). Similarly here, the figure of John begets agitation – his call to repentance, the sense of urgency, the resistance of the old order. But when the presence of God in the person of Jesus is finally seen, it comes in the form of a dove, a symbol of peace, that descends and remains upon him.

In my experience, and perhaps you know this too, crises about relationships or identity or life direction can involve long periods of suffering, as we're tossed by fear, indecision and resistance. But if we're faithful to the watching and the waiting, there comes a moment when we break through into the still-point. 'A small shy truth arrives', as Michael Leunig says – something usually quite simple and clear and liberating – even if it can also seem huge and impossible and painful. And when it arrives it's as if we recognize it – even though we didn't know it in advance, just as John insisted that 'I myself did not know him' before he pointed with absolute assurance to Jesus as the one of whom he had been speaking all along. It's not the strident certainty of opinion, but a deep knowing of the truth, an unveiling that sheds light and brings peace and remains.

We celebrate this advent season in and as a time of crisis. Yet it seems to me there are signs that a deeper knowing of truth is slowly arising in our world – a heart-knowing of our inter-connectedness with the natural world; a recognition of and receptivity to the wisdom of indigenous peoples; a yearning for a more integral form of economic and social life. This knowing is contested – there's resistance, reaction, the break-through not yet fully realized. We are wearied at times by a sense of prolonged unresolvedness as we struggle to birth new ways of being human on this earth. But John, I think, helps us imagine a way to keep faith with it all. With him, then, may we learn what is ours to do and be; and may we cultivate our heart's knowing so as to recognize amidst the turmoil and confusion, the light and peace of Christ among us, drawing us on.