

Advent Calendar (Luke 1. 39-45)

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Advent Calendar

He will come like last leaf's fall.

One night when the November wind
has flayed the trees to the bone, and earth wakes choking on the mould,
the soft shroud's folding.

He will come like frost.

One morning when the shrinking earth
opens on mist, to find itself
arrested in the net
of alien, sword-set beauty.

He will come like dark.

One evening when the bursting red
December sun draws up the sheet
and penny-masks its eye to yield
the star-snowed fields of sky.

He will come, will come,
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.

He will come like child.

Rowan Williams

Our theme this Advent has been 'Apocalypse and Subversion'. Four weeks ago, I noted that whereas the secular season of preparation for Christmas seems (on the surface, at least) colourful, happy, tinsel bedecked and carol-filled, the church's preparation is distinctly darker and more troubled. Many of the readings set for this time are tinged by apocalyptic overtones – a sense of danger, threat and imminent judgement, as well as a certain straining expectation – peering towards the future, hoping, waiting ... who knows for quite what. We've been wondering what that's about. What I've suggested is that in the liturgy of Advent, we are undergoing

something. We are being led from one way of seeing and being, in order to be opened to another.

In the first weeks of Advent, we start well and truly within the apocalyptic imagination. That is, within an essentially violent and dualistic sense of the world. Traditionally, apocalyptic thinking involves a cosmic dualism between heaven and earth; a dualism in time between this world and the world to come; and a social dualism between the good and bad, righteous and unrighteous.¹ In this vision, God is also conceived in dualistic ways – merciful and good to some, wrathful and vengeful towards others. Remember our reading from Advent 1? The prophecies of destruction of the existing order? ‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken’ (Luke 21.25-26).

The next week, Advent 2, was in a similar key. We had John the Baptist’s urgent call to repent lest we perish. ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance’ (Luke 3. 7-8). For One is coming with a purifying fire: ‘His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire’ (Luke 3. 17).

And although this early Advent imagery is difficult, dangerous – there is I think truth to be gleaned here. If the injustice and unreality that corrodes persons, systems, relations between nations and with the natural world is no longer to hold sway, then something does need to be overthrown. There must be an end to ‘former things’. In his extraordinary poem, ‘Advent Calendar’, Rowan Williams recognises that God’s Advent means some things must and will die: ‘He will come like last leaf’s fall. One night when the November wind has flayed the trees to the bone, and earth wakes choking on the mould, the soft shroud’s folding’.² And if something new is to

¹ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996), p.124.

² Rowan Williams, ‘Advent Calendar’, *The Poems of Rowan Williams* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2014), p.15.

become possible in place of this old, there's also need of judgement – a reckoning with the truth, making clear of the outline of reality and realigning with it. 'He will come like frost. One morning when the shrinking earth opens on mist, to find itself arrested in the net of alien, sword-set beauty'. Death and judgement, an end to an old order and sharp, renewing, clarity of vision – these are necessary movements in the Advent liturgy.

But what then? The problem with the apocalyptic imagination is that if all that happens is a punishing, vengeful, unforgiving overthrow of former things, then in fact nothing really has changed. New faces may be in charge, new ideologies deemed 'right', but the underlying energies are the same. It's reversal without redemption, without transformation. And we know where this leads. Just think about the dualistic tendencies wreaking havoc in our world. The polarising of discourse, the demonising of the 'other'; the fear-filled sense that I am only OK, only safe, if *they* are cut off, cut out; either physically or socially. Thus militant fundamentalists are pitted against militant atheists; Taliban against ISIS; climate activists against climate deniers; populists against so-called 'elites'. And we're all so easily caught in this; our rightful yearning for justice, for redress, for renewal of life, is so readily weaponised against those who seem to be in our way. If only they could be got rid of, how much better things would be. But that's the illusion.

Let me say it again. The problem with the apocalyptic imagination is that if, in situations of injustice and unreality, all that happens is a punishing, vengeful, unforgiving overthrow of the old, then in fact nothing really has changed. There may be temporary relief. But sooner or later we end up in exactly the same place.

By Advent 3, then, we glimpse that if death and judgement are to serve the possibility of real healing and restoration, then there must be a deeper reconciliation of our alienation. And that requires a capacity to bear the pain of hurt and division without paying it forward; a desire to forgive what we have against each other, and to be present – lovingly – to the whole. This is how God redeems, as we saw in last week's reading from Zephaniah. 'The Lord has taken away the judgements against

you', the prophet proclaims to Israel, 'and will bring you home' (Zeph.3. 15, 20) for no other reason than that mercy is God's nature.

The question is, how does this capacity, this quality of being become available to us? How do we learn to live from here so as to transform our world, our relationships? Good intentions and will-power alone won't get us there, for however much we desire it, this way of being cannot be self-generated or forced. Some deeper shift within us is called for. Our tradition says this shift is available, if we'll open ourselves to receive it – in radical prayer and poverty of spirit. But usually we do this, only when we've got to the end of our own resources, when we've let go our ego-ic projects for being good and getting right. This is humility – the humility of Mary; and it involves a degree of 'unknowing', maybe even a 'dark night'.

'He will come like dark', Williams writes: 'One evening when the bursting red December sun draws up the sheet and penny-masks its eye to yield the star-snowed fields of sky'. Only when our old way of seeing and being has been eclipsed, does there come an unexpected revelation of new possibilities, previously invisible, unimaginable. There may be no clear sense yet of who we're becoming, or what newness, what future is unfolding; there's just watching, waiting, navigating by the faint glimmer of star-light. Until finally, there comes a breakthrough. A breakthrough into deeper knowing, more reconciled being; a breakthrough that arrives in some sense from beyond us but is the deep truth of us, and feels always wondrous, surprising, like gift.

In the Christian vision, Jesus is this gift. In him, all the old violent dualisms are reconciled. Heaven and earth, God and humanity are no longer divided, but are at one; time and eternity, this world and the next, interpenetrate; good and bad, righteous and unrighteous are contemplated alike by his tender, forgiving gaze. 'He is our peace', says the Letter to the Ephesians, 'in his flesh he has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us' (Eph.2. 14).

And what's critical is that this is no abstract idea of peace floating above the wounding reality of our world. Any of us who've suffered deep hurt, trauma, conflict know it's not enough sincerely to profess ideals of harmony, forgiveness, integration.

To make any difference, to be effective, these ideals must be embodied. Somehow (and it can take a long time), we must live into them, be transformed by them from within. This is incarnation, Word and spirit becoming flesh. Jesus embodied this reconciliation in all his living and dying. This is why his birth is celebrated as a breakthrough in human being, the presence among us of a new humanity which (mysteriously) he enables us to share.

‘He will come, will come, will come’ (note the threefold repetition) ‘like crying in the night, like blood, like breaking, as the earth writhes to toss him free. He will come like child’. Like any breakthrough, incarnation is accompanied by turbulence; like any birth, there’s pain to be borne. Little wonder apocalyptic images are so deeply tied to the church’s preparation for Christmas, even as they’re in the process of being subverted by it.

And here, perhaps, lies a hope for our apocalyptic times. We live with a sense of threatened end, the travail of creation and distress among the nations. But he has come. He has made available to us a relationship with reality, with the loving source of all, that reconciles us to ourselves and restores us to our world and to one another. To undergo our transformation from hurting to whole, from vengefulness to grace, is painful. To allow his life to birth in ours is, as it was for Mary, a labour of love, courage and faith. But he is our peace. And blessed are we who believe there will be a fulfilment of what has been spoken to us by the Lord.