

Fortune Restored (Zephaniah 3. 14-20)

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The season of Advent begins by asking us to face up to what's out of alignment in our lives – personally, corporately. It wants us to tell the truth about our need, fear, confusion; to turn from destructive ways of being and acknowledge where we're stuck or tangled or collectively unjust. This is judgement and repentance. And it's the necessary condition for being open to the possibility of newness, transformation, gift. Here, in this empty, quieted place, we wait. We wait on the Lord. And at some point, the Lord comes. This at least is the testimony of our tradition.

I find this a powerful way of imagining and inhabiting human life; I think it's also true. But in our culture, it sounds pretty weird. Not easy to talk about in public. So I thought it might be helpful to explore this basic promise of Advent a little more. What does it really mean to say the Lord comes? What is the gift we are waiting for?

At heart, I think, we're looking for wholeness. An inescapable 'hunger for wholeness shows every substitute to be false', Laurence Freeman has said.¹ We're looking for home, healing, rest, the consummation of love. In the Scriptures, this yearning for wholeness, restoration and peace is often connected specifically to the fortunes of the people of Israel, their homecoming from exile, their liberation from oppression. The prophet Zephaniah celebrates the coming of God in these terms: 'Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgements against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more' (3.14-15). And this was exactly the frame of reference the

¹ Laurence Freeman, 'Unified Consciousness: One Mind One Heart', WCCM Theme for 2022, <https://wccm.org/articles/unified-consciousness-one-in-mind-and-heart/>. All quotations from Laurence Freeman are from this article.

disciples had for Jesus himself, when he returned to them in the resurrection: ‘Lord, is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel’ (Acts 1.6).

But just as I’ve suggested that the liturgy of Advent shifts *how* we imagine God coming – not with devouring fire and punishment for the wicked, but vulnerably as child; so I’m wondering if it shifts our understanding of the *meaning* of God’s coming and the gift it is. For in Jesus, it seems, God’s coming brings not the external restoration of national or even personal fortune, but homecoming and peace of a different order, restoration to ourselves and rest in God.

It’s a strange thing that a sense of exile and alienation, of being not quite at home and yet homesick, seems built into the human experience. This is symbolised by stories of pilgrimage or quest, departure and return, that are present in all wisdom traditions. ‘In the quest symbol of life’, Freeman writes, ‘we question and search for something we know but don’t know’. We long for something we’re not sure exists. ‘The questing pilgrim leaves a world we know and call home but which is simply not enough. So, like Abraham, the father of three faiths ... [like] the knights searching for the Grail or even the Prodigal Son, discontent and division send us off on a quest for the unity that can alone complete us’.

Yet it’s not that we actually need to go anywhere; it’s more that we need to realise something. ‘In origin, humanity is gifted with a relational responsiveness to the divine’, says theologian Kerrie Hide. We are children of God, born to be in relationship with God. It is this ‘gifted origin’ that ‘creates the potential for ... fruition in the fullness of God’s time’.² Julian of Norwich speaks of our being knitted to the divine life. You have made us for yourself, said St Augustine, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. Or, as Freeman puts it, ‘We return home again finally, with a self-knowledge and perspective on life that may not answer all our questions but has brought us peace and wisdom’.

² Kerrie Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfilment: The Soteriology of Julian of Norwich* (Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 2001), p.xiii.

The essential insight of Advent, however, is that to enter this peace, to be restored fully to ourselves and to our place in the whole, is not just a matter of wanting it, turning towards it, or even letting go what's in the way. All this is necessary. But at a certain point, God must come to us. This is the grace we are waiting for. The fullness we cannot realise for ourselves but must receive as gift. All we can do is to be here, awake, receptive, hospitable, real.

So what does it mean to say the Lord comes? In the symbol system of our tradition, it means that the undergirding truth of our lives, the love that gives us being, is given, is available to all who call. We are recipients of promise. 'I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you ... when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord', according to Zephaniah. Or as Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, proclaims: 'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace'.

And what is the gift of the Lord's coming? What are we waiting for? Oneness with ourselves and others; reconciliation of division; integration of wounds; fullness of love. 'Unified consciousness is our original home, our source of being and our quest'. And, says Freeman, 'at its critical point the quest is made in stillness and the arrival home is an embrace. Really it doesn't matter whether we call this "God" or not'. This embracing reality is beyond concepts, yet it is the essential meaning and the fulfilment of every human journey. 'We are born in order to be healed'. And so we pray, Maranatha; come, Lord.