

The Axe at the Root of the Tree (Luke 3. 1-18)

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‘From climate change to nuclear war to the rise of demagogic populists, our world is shaped by doomsday expectations’. This is from a recent work in political theory that describes us as living in ‘apocalyptic times’. A reviewer of this book notes ‘the dramatic surge in apocalyptic politics throughout the world’ in which ‘rhetoric of doomsday, visions of tribulation and redemption, and “end times” ideologies not only persist but actually pervade the supposedly secular age’.¹ John the Baptist, it seems, would be right at home.

We’ve begun the season of Advent. Last week, I noted that whereas the secular season of preparation for Christmas is itself festive, all tinsel and lights, the church begins its lead up to the birth of Jesus in a distinctly darker, indeed apocalyptic, key. And I’m wondering what this is about. After all, apocalyptic language and sentiment looks dangerous to many of us. It divides people into good and bad, righteous and unrighteous; it seems to feed paranoia, fear and judgement – just look at the flourishing of conspiracy theories, trolling and extremism in our age. In such times, how are we responsibly to handle texts like the one we’ve just heard? And what does this genre, this way of seeing the world, have to do with the supposedly ‘good news’ of Jesus coming among us? Why are we drawing on texts like this to prepare our hearts?

Well, let me start with what I take to be the substance of today’s passage. Part of what’s going on in Advent is an invitation – an exhortation – to get real about what our lives are like and where they’re heading. How are we being in the world? Who are we becoming? Who will we be when we die? The church believes that

¹ Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Reviewer quote John P. McCormick, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/political-realism-in-apocalyptic-times/70BCF2E86C46FB622635AF00E01B5A06#fndtn-information>

facing these questions is necessary preparation for meeting Jesus, because if he is the light of the world, the true measure of human being, then to the extent that we ourselves are untrue or doing works of darkness, we will find his coming almost unbearable. 'In Advent', writes Rowan Williams, 'Christians have for centuries thought about death and judgement, about heaven and hell. They've thought about the way in which, when we're up against the truth for the first time, when we really see what the reality of God is like, it will be a shock to the system. It may be deeply painful as well as deeply joyful ... It will be that experience of confronting the truth in such a way that you're changed for good'.²

This is what John the Baptist is on about. He's calling people, as did all the prophets of ancient Israel, to get real, to face up to themselves, so that when God appears they'll be ready. 'You brood of vipers'. I see you for who you are, I see your self-interest, your assurance of righteousness, your reliance on your pedigree. And it's all bollocks. 'Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham'. It counts for nothing, unless you bear fruit, the fruit of God. And they're shocked into sobriety: 'What then should we do?' 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise'. Tax collectors, notorious for exploiting their position for personal gain, are to 'collect no more than is prescribed'. And soldiers are likewise not to extort money by threats or false accusations, but to be satisfied with their wages.

The life that matters, in other words, the fruit that is the sign of turning towards God, is justice, equity, kindness. Being confronted with our failures in this regard is 'judgement' and it can be (as Williams says, painful). If you've had an experience of coming to see yourself suddenly (or maybe gradually) in a truer light – you'll know this. It's hard to look at certain things, to recognise the impact of certain behaviours, see how manipulative even your niceness can be, or the way you've

² Rowan Williams, 'A Reflection on Advent' in *[Darkness Yielding: Liturgies, Prayers and Reflections for Advent, Christmas, Holy Week and Easter](#)* (London: Canterbury Press/Cairns Publications, 2009), pp.6–9.

been blind to the privilege of your whiteness, your gender, your class. Repentance is never a pleasant experience – and it does involve a certain violence or at the least, as Williams says, ‘a shock to the system’. But it’s also mercy. Because once we’ve seen and once we’ve turned, the truth frees us from some of our double-mindedness and defended-ness; it expands and softens us, which means it enables us to receive the gift of goodness coming towards us. That’s why in Advent, we draw on a text like this to prepare our hearts.

But what about its apocalyptic frame? That axe at the root of the tree, that winnowing fork, that chaff being burnt in unquenchable fire. Is all that threatening imagery really necessary? Doesn’t it just get in the way of the text’s important meaning? Doesn’t it just scare and scar children brought up in fundamentalism, and cause a certain cohort of religious folk to hare off and enact terrible violence in the name of God? What use is it?

Well, this brings us to the question we touched on last week, to do with our tradition’s relationship to its own heritage. Apocalyptic literature developed in the Hebrew Scriptures during late prophetic times.³ It was a genre widespread in the eastern Mediterranean in Jesus’ day, and seems rooted not just in the bible, but somewhere deep in the human psyche: in our unreconstructed desire for vengeance on those who’ve hurt us, and our tendency, particularly in times of crisis or uncertainty, to resort to black and white, dualistic thinking. When John the Baptist wants to speak of judgement upon injustice and the purifying fire of God’s nearer presence, this was the frame of reference he had to hand.

The surprising thing about the gospels, however, is that when Jesus comes it doesn’t actually look like this. Where the apocalyptic imagination divides the world into righteous and unrighteous, saved and damned, Jesus seems not to have accepted these social dualities.⁴ When the religious authorities complain later in this gospel about him eating with ‘tax collectors and sinners’, Jesus says: ‘Those who are

³ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996), p.124.

⁴ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.125.

well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance' (Luke 5. 31-32). And notice that the form of *his* call is not threat of punishment, but 'sitting at the table with them' (5.29). In the same way, where the apocalyptic imagination makes God in its own violent image, God's wrath against his 'enemies' a proxy for our own, Jesus speaks of God in non-dual, non-violent terms: 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous' (Matthew 5.45).

And if this is right, if Jesus is not trapped within the violent dualism of apocalyptic imagination, then this transforms what divine judgement looks and feels like. In Jesus, God not only calls for our repentance, but enables it by loving solidarity; in Jesus, God comes among us not seeking to punish, but to show us the way to life. This is, as theologian James Alison says, a subversion of the apocalyptic imagination from within. Judgement is still necessary. It matters that we face the truth, for we cannot know God unless we do. But the good news Jesus brings is that the end of God's judgement is not mutilation, separation and unquenchable fire, but liberation, belonging and life.

We find it awkward that the gospels retain elements of apocalyptic thinking, and that we begin to prepare for Christmas by reading such texts. But I'm starting to wonder: could it be that our Advent readings reflect a rather sophisticated pedagogical strategy? That they prepare us for Jesus' coming by deliberately setting up a tension between a dualistic way of imagining God and divine judgement, and what actually will be revealed in the coming of this child? Are we being prepared for something utterly new, by being confronted with the futility of the old? And if so, this leads me to one last speculation.

I began by noting the apocalyptic tendencies in our own time. And I'm wondering what our undertaking this Advent journey might offer our wider culture. Taken in isolation, certain biblical texts fuel the apocalyptic imagination. But if we

read them in season, as part of a liturgy that points ultimately to God-with-us in Jesus, is it possible we could see them as functioning homeopathically, like a small dose of what ails us, a kind of therapy for our dis-ease? Our world does feel out of joint; there is a sense of crisis, confusion, suffering and fear. Apocalyptic language gives voice to this experience and our customary reaction to it; it points to the need for some decisive turning or change. But in the end, our healing requires us to find a way beyond vengeful, violent reactivity; it requires us to expand our hearts and transform our response, so we may be led from darkness into light, from punishment to grace. This is what undergoing the Advent liturgy is designed to work in us – and perhaps this is a gift we have to offer our age.

As Williams puts it: ‘During Advent, we try to get ourselves a bit more used to the truth – the truth about ourselves, which is not always very encouraging, but the truth about God above all which is always encouraging. The One who comes will come with a great challenge. It will be like fire on the earth, as the Bible says. And yet the One who comes is coming in love. He’s coming to set us free’.⁵

⁵ Williams, ‘A Reflection on Advent’.