

Now the Time Came (Luke 1. 57-80)

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When we began our Advent journey four weeks ago, I said that in the Christian calendar, this time is observed as a season of waiting and longing, of anticipation and preparation, thresholds and edges. In Advent, we stand on the cusp of newness. It's a liminal, uncertain, fearful, hopeful time. For this reason, the virtues most associated with Advent are patience and endurance, hope and non-grasping expectancy, trust and receptivity. The season of Advent is spiritual formation by means of delaying gratification, heightening desire and deepening faith. It's a space that seems familiar to many of us; it reflects the state of unfulfilled yearning in which we can live much of our lives.

And yet what's striking in the Advent story is its insistence that gratification is not endlessly deferred. The gospels see no virtue, it seems, in the permanent frustration of desire, no moral superiority bestowed by a state of endless asceticism and dissatisfaction. The time will come, the time does come, when the promise is realised and hope is fulfilled, when faith is (so to speak) rewarded or justified. 'Now the time came', writes Luke, 'for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son'. Just as, the time will come for Mary too 'to deliver her child'.

So if the Advent season begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth's unmet longing, it draws to a close with their wondering celebration of the birth of their son and the fulfilment of promise. 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel', Zechariah sings, 'for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them ... he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors'. A few months later, the figure of Simeon will express this same soul-deep satisfaction when he sets eyes on the infant Jesus, takes the baby in his arms and praises God, saying 'my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples'. After the long delay, after the waiting and

the hoping, the conceiving and gestating, comes the birthing, the rejoicing. Here and now the time is fulfilled; here and now the promise is redeemed. Or so the story tells us.

But what about in the real world? On Thursday this past week, some of us formed a Circle for Solidarity, conscious that many of us – many in our world – are carrying heavy loads. We came to be with one another and share what we're finding hard to bear. Some spoke of the pain of this seasonal celebration of fulfilment, birth and new life in the context of their unanswered prayers for healing, in the face of ageing, and chronic or terminal illness. We remembered those who have longed for children of their own but may never have them, and those whose children have died or become estranged. We thought of asylum seekers and indigenous peoples in punishing detention, their minds and bodies destroyed by incarceration. We spoke of those grieving the death of life-partners, parents and siblings, and of the deep anxieties of our age.

At Christmas, the church celebrates its faith that into our troubled, dark and pain-filled world, God has entered bodily. Christ is born. We're no longer waiting for the Messiah to come, for something to happen. For the time has come and we live in the aftermath of something having happened. We dwell on the other side of the realisation of promise. But what does this really mean?

On Luke's account, the first person to express a comprehensive vision of this new age was Zechariah. As his own part in the story comes to its culmination, he's filled with the Holy Spirit and speaks what he sees unfolding in terms of liberation, healing, enlightenment and peace. He proclaims the liberation of God's people 'from the hands of their enemies', as well as from the inward constriction of fear. He proclaims their salvation, the felt knowledge of being reconciled to God and one another through the forgiveness of sin, through release from all that keeps humanity locked in destructive habits of being. In the power of the Spirit, Zechariah proclaims that 'the tender mercy of God', the palpable presence of divine regard and acceptance is breaking through unexpectedly and unmerited 'like the dawn from on

high', and helping us see ourselves and all things differently, giving light 'to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death'. And he prophesies that this radical new sense of God's tender presence with, among and for us, will make possible a new way of being with and for one another, enabling compassion, and true and lasting peace. On Luke's account, this is the gift given at Christmas, the new possibility for being now made available. To the extent that we recognise this gift and enter into the field of its energy, so Zechariah says, we inhabit a new world.

But is this really true? What does this proclamation actually amount to in a world which seems still so full of unanswered prayer and unfulfilled hope, so full of oppression, terror and hatred? Well, to begin, I think it's worth noting that Zechariah speaks of the 'dawn from on high'. Laurence Freeman has remarked that while sunrise is an event, dawn is a process. In a similar vein, Rowan Williams has said that the new life made available through Christ 'is not infused in all-conquering fullness in a single moment' and we do not receive it as a possession. It is 'simply, new life. Which is to say, a new world of possibilities, a new future to be constructed day by day. Life, after all, implies movement and growth'.¹

By analogy we might think of the new life now dawning for the people of Syria or for the remaining members of the Bali Nine just released from prison; the new world of possibilities that comes into being with the birth of a child or the beginning of relationship. In each case, there is a decisive change; some future is opening up that just wasn't there before. But the way this future is lived into, the extent to which its promise is realised ... well, that depends on those to whom the gift is given. So it is with the new life made possible by the coming of Jesus. There's been a decisive change, but it remains for us to live into it and realise its promise.

But does that mean we're just pushed back into a state of waiting, hoping, anticipating? Does it mean that real gratification is once more deferred? Well, yes and no. It's true that the promise of God's freedom and life is not yet fully realised in

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, second edition, 1991), p.19.

our common life. There's a sense in which the virtues of Advent remain key dispositions of Christian life. But God's promise is also truly realised here and now, It is possible to touch and taste it, to be changed by it. We have the testimonies of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Simeon. We have also testimonies from our own community – and I want to share two.

The first is from Jane Keogh. As many of you know, Jane has been an advocate for asylum seekers for over twenty years, especially for those detained on Manus Island and Nauru. On Thursday, at our Circle for Solidarity Jane spoke of the ever more desperate plight of the traumatised men now released from immigration detention on Manus but set adrift with almost no government support to make their own way in Papua New Guinea. She shared her profound distress at their anguish, her sense of powerlessness to solve their situation. Sometimes, she said, she doesn't know how she'll cope, how she'll continue to be there for them. And yet, alongside this radical distress, she said she's come to know constantly within her a profound and mysterious peace, an abiding assurance of God's presence that enables her to bear the pain, and even to know joy in the midst of all that remains unresolved. And it's this peace, this surprising and unlooked for joy, that strengthens her to keep going, to keep shining light, to keep (as she puts it) 'making a difference in my work for others'.

A second testimony comes from Ros Lam, a member of our Victorian chapter who died in November after a long struggle with cancer. In recent months, Ros wrote of how her practice of meditation had led her 'to feel the reality of the presence of God in my life, and while the crisis had previously caused me to fragment and fall apart, I now began to experience a lightness and sense of clarity that had previously eluded me'.² A few weeks before she died, Ros wrote of finding herself unexpectedly in a time of deep silent meditation: 'It felt like I was immersed in unconditional love, and yet there was more. In this place, God was everywhere – in everything. It wasn't

² From 'Leaning into Love', an article by Ros Lam in the July 2024 edition of Coolamon magazine, a publication of the Australian Network for Spiritual Direction. Cited by Roland Ashby, 'The spark of love that can never be extinguished', <https://www.thelivingwater.com.au/blog/the-spark-of-love-that-can-never-be-extinguished>

just love that I was immersed in. It was all the voices of God, it was pain too and suffering, and heartache; I wasn't running away from all these things. They were there too. It was as if I could bear them now, because there was beauty all around it as well.³ And shortly before she died, Ros woke briefly from her unconscious state to speak what would be her final words to her family: 'Utter peace ... utter peace'.

At Christmas, the church testifies that we're no longer waiting for something to happen, for the Messiah to come. We live in the aftermath of something having happened, in time of the realisation of promise. So whether or not we feel our hopes fulfilled, whether we're living or dying, to the extent that we open ourselves to receive this gift and enter into the field of its energy, we in fact are beginning to inhabit and so helping to create a different world.

A blessed Christmas to you all.

³ Ashby, 'The spark of love that can never be extinguished'.