

First Sunday of Advent, year C

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Introduction

There was a time when Advent was just like Lent. The Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh recalls, in his famous poem 'Advent' a childhood memory when his family would fast in the four weeks leading up to Christmas. Already poor, his farming community would enter into the dark days of December stripped of the few luxuries they had — butter for bread, sugar for tea — all in the aim of opening the heart to the luxuries held within:

We have tested and tasted too much, lover –
Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.
But here in this Advent-darkened room
Where the dry black bread and the sugarless tea
Of penance will charm back the luxury
Of a child's soul, we'll return to Doom
The knowledge we stole but could not use.

As we enter into Advent we will reflect on how simplicity may be a way of preparing the heart for the radical oncoming of story that is Christmas, by paying attention to the demands of justice, focus and resolution in the readings of Advent.

(A few years ago the magnificent poet Carol Rumens wrote a reflection on Kavanagh's Advent poem. It can be found by [clicking here](#).)

Text

Luke 21:25–36

“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. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is

near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Comment

It is always striking that the texts for Advent are as stark as they are. The lectionary brings us to some of the more troubled sections of Luke’s gospel for this first week of the season: words about signs in the sun, moon and stars; words about foreboding and shaking and confusion; words about power and glory. The texts propose visions of dystopia.

Before reflecting on the theological insight of the dramatic language, it’s worthwhile imagining oneself into the mind of the writer of Luke’s gospel. At this stage, it was supposed that Jesus of Nazareth might come back at any point. As the early gospel tradition developed some people began to imagine apocalyptic endings *any day now* and so, you find New Testament texts that are disparaging about, say, marriage, because it’s seen as a distraction from the cataclysmic events believed to be just around the corner.

One can read that as a limited understanding of time and religion, but one can also read this that there are always people alive for whom events signal to them the end of the world. It may be that the last number of years for many individuals have signalled for them serious political times, with increasing division and rhetoric and public acceptance of boorish performances of masculinities. However, there are entire populations of people who have been living with the consequences of political misrepresentation, manipulation and despotism. The world is always ending — for some populations. And often, those populations are conscious that their drama is ignorable by many.

And so the ancient writer is bringing us into something that is always happening all around us. Awfulnesses are always happening, and the opening text of Advent calls the attention of the entire church to turn towards those places where signs are ominous, worlds are ending, storms and fainting and terriblenesses are all around.

What is extraordinary in this is that the religious imagination is called to a deep integrity: “be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation”. The faithful are called to not be distracted by fripperies, but also not to be distracted by devastation. To hold deeply to the principle and foundations that will guide you and hold you steady. The four-week drama of Advent builds this sense of foreboding about heavy times, and culminates it all in the risk of God to become incarnate in the body of a small child.

Response

Ignatius of Loyola advised his followers to find, in their prayer, something that would hold them steady. Seek and test different ways, he said, try out a few, so that you can find what will support you to be steady in this life.

What supports you in keeping steady: whether in a time of consolation or a time of desolation?

That level of prayer is best for each particular individual where God our Lord communicates Himself more. He sees, he knows, what is best for each one and, as he knows all, he shows each the road to take. What we can do to find that way with his divine grace is to seek and test the way forward in many different fashions, so that an individual goes ahead in that way which for him or her is the clearest and happiest and most blessed in this life.

~ Ignatius of Loyola.

Prayer

Jesus, you are always at the world's end,
standing there, with people for whom everything has fallen away.
In the hidden corners of humanity, we find you,
abandoned with the abandoned.
May we never forget that the luxuries enjoyed by some
are not enjoyed by all,
and may we be stirred to turn our attention
towards the work of beatitude
for all.
Because this moved you
and moved you
and kept moving you
towards the work of beatitude.
Amen.