

ADVENT 3: the Many Sides of Advent

Isaiah 3, 1-10; Magnificat; James 5, 7-10; Matthew 11, 2-11

I was once invited to preach at the main Parish Mass of a neighbouring Roman Catholic church – on the third Sunday of Advent. I checked the readings with the parish priest, and they seemed much as ours, with John the Baptist prominent in the Gospel. So I prepared a hopeful yet challenging sermon about John's hopeful yet radical approach to being ready for the coming Messiah. I was a bit perplexed to find that much in the Mass – responses, hymns, proper preface, all seemed to be not about John but about Mary. And then the pink candle, and rose-coloured vestments, (For us, Mary's turn comes next week.)

To me, that mix illustrates how Advent weaves together many different strands, without even mentioning the Four Last Things. Take the readings for today: that wonderful message of hope from Isaiah; and the Gospel – John the Baptist wondering how he could be stuck in Herod's prison, if Jesus really was 'the one who is to come' – 'or do we wait for another?' Jesus responds to the messengers not directly but by pointing to what was actually going on: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear... all the prophetic signs of when God's saving Messiah would be here! That's an important message for us too: to get on with being effective disciples of Jesus and not just piously and passively waiting for God to end the world!

Yet only a few years after the Gospel events, James would write in the letter we've just heard, telling the hearers to 'be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord'. When of course he *had* come, already, and clearly gone; yet the mucky old world was carrying on just as before. They were expecting the *second* coming of Messiah, to put everything right. They'd have had a long wait.

We speak of Advent as 'preparing for Christmas,' a phrase that could just mean the obvious hectic rush, ['Ordered the turkey yet? Sent a card to Auntie Flo? You said you would...'] Rather, can we make time 'to hear again the message of the angels', and through that, to stand back a bit to see our life, our self, in the whole scheme of things – in the light of *our own mortality* and the non-permanence of earth as a habitable planet; the future Armageddon measured perhaps not in billions of years ahead, but in a very few human generations...

As if that were not enough for Advent, there's also today the little matter of a tree. It's not an essential in our worship, but an optional extra which can be full of meaning. To those of a rigorous ecological mind, all that land should not be used for trees that are cut down when small; they should be left to grow into a carbon-absorbing forest. To those of a puritanical mind, the tree should be shunned as a relic of pagan beliefs. No doubt sacred trees have been part of many faiths, and in the OT there are many warnings against worship of terebinths or sacred oaks. Yet trees are profoundly entwined in the whole Judaeo-Christian tradition. In the garden of Eden there was the 'tree of life in the midst of the garden,' as well as the tree of the knowledge of good and

evil. At the very end of the Bible too – trees on the riverside that bear fruit every month of the year, and whose leaves are ‘for the healing of the nations.’

What’s more, a tree is at the very centre of the Christian story. The early Christians often referred to the cross of Jesus as a tree. We can still see it in passiontide hymns from before AD 500 which we still use; in the hymn of that meticulous mediaeval theologian Thomas Aquinas; and from more recent centuries ones as diverse as Isaac Watts’ ‘When I survey the wondrous cross’ and the spiritual ‘Were you there when they crucified my Lord?’ Historically, it does seem that the Romans often used a handy tree-trunk to nail the cross-bar to, rather than fixing up the strong, steady post favoured by later artists. So nothing wrong with a tree in church, to remind us both of the birth and the saving death of Jesus: the tree of death becoming the tree of life.

Meanwhile, the more we know about trees the more wonderful they are. As if photosynthesis were not miraculous enough, and the way a large tree can pump sap in huge quantities to great heights, supporting all kinds of life in the canopy, and meanwhile absorbing masses of carbon, so that tree-planting is now a virtuous community activity rather than just some one-off memorial act. And then there’s timber, so endlessly useful to humankind – and bio-degradable.

I don’t understand the complexities of the root system, but it seems that some fungi and other micro-organisms live a life of mutual benefit with the tree’ each giving and receiving. Great oaks from little microbes grow. It’s the interdependence of very different chemical substances and forms of life that are responsible for the trees we love and need so urgently. We all might take a hint from that.

In this Eucharist we recall Jesus blessing, or giving thanks (the words are almost interchangeable) over bread and wine. In blessing the Christmas tree we are not only honouring it, but giving thanks for it – for all the gifts it represents, gifts far deeper than just providing a hanger for baubles and pretty lights. Without resorting to tree worship, we can indeed give thanks to God for such wonderful gifts, of which our tree is a token. And in blessing, know that we are blessed.

Harold Stringer