

# Advent and Utopia

Recalling the English radical and utopian tradition, Dinah Livingstone looks at some of its biblical sources, which figure prominently in the liturgy of Advent.

'For really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he.' So said Thomas Rainborough in the Putney Debates, which took place in St Mary's Church Putney in 1647. Giles Fraser recently resigned as Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral because he refused to countenance a violent eviction of the Occupy London Stock Exchange protest camp in St Paul's Churchyard. Before taking up his post at St Paul's, he was vicar of Putney, and there he helped organise an exhibition about these great debates in St Mary's Church.

Two years after the Putney Debates, Gerrard Winstanley, the leader of the Diggers, in his *Watchword to the City of London and the Army*, published 'at the Sign of the black Spread Eagle at the west end of Pauls, 1649', declared: 'The Earth should be made a common treasury of livelihood to whole mankind, without respect of persons'. And this is how Milton concluded one of his few Shakespearean sonnets, written in May 1652 and addressed to 'Cromwell, our chief of men' (and a *committee*):

Help us to save free conscience from the paw  
Of hireling wolves, whose gospel is their maw.

In his *Witness against the Beast*, E. P. Thompson traces how that radical tradition from the time of the English Revolution continues down to William Blake (He speculates that Blake's mother may have been a Muggleonian.) In his vision of London as Jerusalem, Blake denounces those who selfishly promote only themselves and their own family:

Is this thy soft family love  
Thy cruel patriarchal pride,  
Planting thy family alone,  
Destroying all the World beside?

In his vision Jerusalem is welcoming to all:

In my exchanges every land  
Shall walk, and mine in every land,  
Mutual shall build Jerusalem  
Both heart in heart and hand in hand.

Blake wrote two poems called 'Holy Thursday'. In the first everything is sweet:

'Twas on a Holy Thursday,  
their innocent faces clean,  
The children walking two and two,  
in red and blue and green.

Grey headed beadles walked before,  
with wands as white as snow  
Till into the high dome of Paul's  
they like Thames waters flow.

The second 'Holy Thursday' is a furious denunciation of child poverty in England:

Is this a holy thing to see  
In a rich and fruitful land,  
Babes reduced to misery  
Fed with cold and usurous hand?

Is that trembling cry a song?  
Can it be a song of joy?  
And so many children poor?  
It is a land of poverty!

Recently we heard on the news that child poverty is increasing in England so that within a few years nearly a quarter of children will be living in poverty.

This utopian tradition continues through William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, which begins in London and ends up with a wonderful harvest home banquet set in a fine old country house based on Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire. And the tradition remains up to our own day, as we are seeing now in the camp in St Paul's Churchyard and all over the world.

It also goes back much further than the seventeenth century and one of its most important sources is the Bible. Advent is a time of expectation and I have been thinking about some of the liturgical texts used in the Church of England and the Catholic Church. (In both, the scripture readings are arranged in a three year cycle, so not all these texts are read in services every year.) The epistle for the first Sunday of Advent from Romans (chapter 13) warns: 'Now it is high time to awake out of sleep.' We do indeed need a wake-up call, to the massive inequality in our society and to the way we are treating the Earth, for both of which the corporate greed of unregulated capitalism has a heavy responsibility.

Another Advent theme is repentance and a prominent figure is John the Baptist. In the gospel for the second Sunday of Advent John the Baptist appears, as 'a voice crying in the wilderness' calling upon people to repent. As one camper in St Paul's Churchyard put it: 'We need a change of heart and mind.' That is a good translation of the biblical Greek

word *μετανοια* (*metanoia*). Or in Paul's words again: 'Let us put off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.'

As Marqusee points out, the theme of utopia goes back to the Old Testament prophets. Countering the doom-laden slogan in defence of unregulated capitalism: 'There is no alternative', the World Social Forum replies: 'Another world is possible.' That is what those prophets urgently see the need for, and prophesy in their terms as the coming reign of God. The Advent liturgy is full of this, particularly from the prophet Isaiah: 'Prepare the way of the Lord. . . Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear . . .' (chapter 40). Or in chapter 61: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . he has sent me to bring good news to the poor . . .'

Another prominent figure in the Advent liturgy is Jesus' mother Mary. When the pregnant Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth in Luke's account (chapter 1), with her song the Magnificat she is the first to proclaim the gospel:

He has put down the mighty  
from their seats and lifted up  
the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with  
good things and sent the rich  
empty away.

When Elizabeth's son John the Baptist announces his baptism of repentance, he specifically quotes the prophet Isaiah (Lk 2: 51):

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths  
straight...the crooked shall be made straight and the  
rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the  
salvation of our God.

Then when Jesus begins his ministry, he goes into the synagogue at Nazareth and reads from the scroll, also of the prophet Isaiah (Lk 4):

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has  
anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has  
sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the  
recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the  
oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord.

Jesus repeats this message in his 'beatitudes' (Lk 6):

Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God  
Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.  
Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

The core of Jesus' teaching is utopian. He announces the coming 'reign of God', a kind society which will be good news for the poor. He insists: 'Another world is possible.'

'Lo! he comes with clouds descending.' In the Advent liturgy this new world is presented as 'the son of man coming on clouds'; Jesus Christ returns to



Magnificat: the pregnant Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth

bring in the kingdom, as the Lord whose coming reign on Earth was foretold by the Old Testament prophets. And since in Europe Advent leads up to the winter solstice, the midwinter Christmas festival also becomes a prayer for the sun to grow stronger, now also the 'Sun of Justice'. The prayer is not only for the winter to pass and spring to return, but for the darkness of our age to be over and a new society to blossom, which is good news for the poor and oppressed. 'Stir up your power, O Lord and come...'

Mary's Magnificat is sung at Vespers (Evensong). At the climax of Advent, in the days leading up to the winter solstice and Christmas, the Magnificat

each day has a special antiphon, called the seven 'Great O antiphons'. The antiphon for 17<sup>th</sup> December\* invokes Wisdom: 'O Wisdom, that came out of the mouth of the Most High, reaching from end to end to arrange everything strongly and sweetly, come and teach us carefulness.' Any attempt to create a kind society will need that wisdom and carefulness. The antiphon for the solstice itself, 21<sup>st</sup> December, is: 'O Daystar, splendour of light eternal and **Sun of Justice**, come and give light to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.'

Those of us who do not believe that a supernatural God will come to solve all our problems realise that if we want to create a good society we have to try and do it ourselves. But these age-old visions and yearnings may still inspire us. They are what Blake called 'poetic tales'.

The theme of renewal extends not only to a new Earth but to a new humanity. Paul develops this as the new humanity 'in Christ'. When we become 'one body because we all share the same bread' we will be a 'new creation', able to live together in a kinder way. That is the coming of 'the whole Christ'. As Origen put it, Christ is 'the kingdom of God in person' (αὐτοβασίλεια του θεου *autobasileia tou theou*). But we should not take this as the *privatisation* of the kingdom of God into a personal relationship with some imagined supernatural being. Rather, 'Christ' has become the eponymous hero, the *personification* of the kingdom, the kind, fully human society.

The theme of a new humanity was prominent in several twentieth century revolutions, in particular, the Cuban and the Nicaraguan Revolutions. They called it '*el hombre nuevo*', who must treat his fellows well. Tomás Borge was the Sandinista Interior Minister (Home Secretary) after the Nicaraguan Revolution, whose famous 'revenge' was to forgive his torturers when he came to power. In his 'Address to the People of Europe' he said: 'This is the finest utopia ever conceived in the history of Latin America, the new

human being.' He urged the people of Europe to embrace this new humanity, so that 'your own mythical ceremonies can be initiated afresh and rise again from their solemn and wonderful burial ground... for the liberty and enjoyment of all the peoples of the Earth.'

So, though probably most of us in Britain do not expect (or hope for) Jesus Christ to 'come with clouds descending', we can translate this New Testament image of a fulfilled humanity 'in Christ' as a 'change of heart and mind', to create a better – utopian – society, upon which the Sun of Justice shines. But of course utopia remains an ideal, a beacon. We do not want a static, 'perfect' society. It will always be a process with new challenges to face, new art, new stories and new poetry. It will be a much more interesting life than the traditional heaven. And since there are no supernatural beings to bring it about, we have keep doing it for ourselves or it will never happen at all.

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\*Sung on these days at Catholic Vespers and may be sung on slightly different days at Church of England Evensong. See page 27 for all the Antiphons.

## Date for your Diary

SOF annual conference 2012

will be on

WORK AND WORTH

Friday July 13 – Sunday July 15

Leicester University

Speakers to be announced.

## WORK COMPETITION

Who wrote the attack on ruthless capitalists printed below?

KATABASIS PRESS is offering prizes of its anthology *Work* – containing all sorts of personal accounts, essays and poems about work – to the first 3 correct answers by email and the first 3 correct answers by post to be received by *Sofia* editor. Answers must give a postal address in Britain.

editor@sofn.org.uk

10 St Martin's Close, London NW1 0HR

*For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,  
And went all naked to the hungry shark;  
For them his ears gushed blood; for them in death  
The seal on the cold ice with piteous bark  
Lay full of darts; for them alone did seethe  
A thousand men in troubles wide and dark;  
Half-ignorant, they turned an easy wheel,  
That set sharp racks at work to pinch and peel.*

*Why were they proud? Because their marble founts  
Gushed with more pride than do a wretch's tears?  
Why were they proud? Because fair orange-mounts  
Were of more soft ascent than lazar stairs?  
Why were they proud? Because red-lined accounts  
Were richer than the songs of Grecian years?  
Why were they proud? Again we ask aloud:  
Why in the name of Glory were they proud?*