

Theological Reflection

Religion as a Human Creation:

5. Advent: 'O Come...'

Dinah Livingstone ponders a classic Christian doctrine.

'Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!' the prophet Isaiah implores God (Is 64:1). The theme of Advent, the four weeks before Christmas, is 'O Come!' Three figures predominate in the liturgy, Mary the mother of Jesus, John the Baptist who announces him as 'the one who is to come' and Jerusalem (Sion), the city. The New Testament describes or anticipates a number of divine descents to Earth, which bring or will bring 'salvation' to humanity.

First of all Advent leads up to Christmas to recall and celebrate the story of the birth of Jesus. But it also looks forward to a 'second coming', which will bring a reign of justice and peace on Earth. Because that still has not happened, Advent recurs every year, still with its yearning cry: 'O come!'

Mary

In Luke's account the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and tells her: 'You will conceive and bear a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High...' Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth and like the great women prophets of the Old Testament sings a song of liberation:

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of
their hearts.
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.

A heavily pregnant Mary trudges to Bethlehem and gives birth to Jesus. The angel tells the shepherds: 'To you is born this day a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.' It isn't very clear here what 'Christ the Lord' means but he will save his people and lift up the lowly. A more developed theology in the Prologue to John's gospel describes this birth as God's own Son, God's own Word ('I AM'), who *is* God, becoming human: 'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we saw his glory.'

When I visited the Occupy camp in St Paul's churchyard in Advent 2011 the rows of red, blue and green round coloured tents reminded me of an antenatal class with rows of heavily pregnant women lying

down doing breathing exercises. Consciously or unconsciously, was that image in the mind of the then canon chancellor of St Paul's when he said, if Jesus was to be born that Christmas it would be in one of those tents?



Pregnant Mary. Baroque painting in St Peter's Abbey Salzburg

The Occupy camp in the heart of the rich City of London was protesting against the idolatry of Mammon and demanding justice for the poor and excluded, who were being targeted by harsh austerity measures. It echoed Mary's Magnificat in wanting to lift up the lowly. There was a fence on which people could pin up anything they wanted to say. In the sentence from John's gospel, 'the Word became flesh

and lived among us', the Greek word for 'lived' – ἐσκηνώσεν, *eskenosen* – is related to the word for 'tent' – σκηνή, *skene* – and there was a notice on the fence in English and Greek: 'The Word became flesh and pitched its tent among us.'

John the Baptist

Mark's gospel begins with Jesus' cousin John the Baptist as a voice crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord!' He announces 'one who is coming after me who is greater than me.' Then when Jesus comes and is baptised by John, a voice comes from heaven saying of Jesus: 'You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased.' Later with exemplary generosity John repeats: 'I am not the Christ. He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice... He must increase but I must decrease' (Jn 3:28-30).

When John is arrested by Herod, he lies in prison in very human desolation and begins to doubt Jesus. He sends messengers to ask him: 'Are you the one who is to come?' Jesus replies: 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news brought to them' (Lk 7:19-22). These are signs of the reign of God on Earth, which Jesus has come to announce. The stories of his healing of those who are – physically or mentally – sick is a sign that the kingdom was about human wholeness.

Jesus, Utopian Prophet

The gospels present Jesus in stark contrast to his cousin John the Baptist. Jesus says: 'John came neither eating nor drinking and they say, "He has a demon"; whereas he, Jesus, came eating and drinking and they say, "Look a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!"' Jesus' feasting 'with publicans and sinners' and stories of miraculous picnics where everyone ate and was filled are signs that the kingdom is also about peace and plenty and an enjoyable social life, not just for the rich, who may have thought their wealth was a sign of God's favour. The kingdom turns the world upside down, it is good news for the poor and hungry and its governing ethic is abundant generosity: 'good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over'. Instead of food banks there will be an eschatological banquet at which the poor will come first:

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.
(Lk 6:20)

Jesus was a utopian prophet with a poetic vision of the imminent coming of the reign of God. Very soon God's kingdom would come down 'on Earth as it is in heaven'. Jesus imagined that God's own action would shortly bring about this reign of God on Earth. The kingdom did not come, as Jesus proclaimed, within the lifetime of 'some of those standing here present' and more than two thousand years later it still has not come. Jesus was wrong. He was wrong that the kingdom was coming soon on Earth and I think he was also wrong that there is a supernatural being who will bring it about.

The Advent liturgy yearns: 'O come and do not delay.' As the delay has now been two thousand years, that is quite a good reason to think that there is no supernatural God and if we want a society of justice and peace, we have to try and bring it about ourselves. But the vision of that kind society coming on Earth at last remains a leading idea, which we can still long for, try to contribute to and pray: 'O come! O come and do not delay!'

It has continued to inspire, for example, the socialist atheist William Morris in his utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (published in 1890). The novel describes the achievement of a kind society in language that is deeply embedded in the Christian tradition and certainly gets the gospel message about eating and drinking in its climactic harvest home feast. The feast takes place in a fictionalised version of Morris's own beautiful house at Kelmscott and is much like an 'eschatological banquet'. And after the second world war there were Christian socialists (such as Richard Acland) in the Atlee government, which began a reduction in inequality and the creation of a welfare state, including setting up the National Health Service, seeing healing as a 'sign of the kingdom'. Unfortunately, from the late 1970s on, the reduction in inequality was not maintained.

A New Humanity

With the Christ Epic, Paul sees Jesus as one who, 'though he was in the form of God,' descends to the lowest depths, death on a cross as a criminal and is then highly exalted. But now as well as being 'in the form of God', he is a man, it is this 'new humanity' which is highly exalted and all human beings can become part of it 'in Christ'. In one of his earliest letters, to the Galatians, Paul writes: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28). As Siedentop points out in his *Inventing the Individual*, this was a novel idea of the 'moral equality' of every human being. When we become 'one body because we all share the same bread' we will be a 'new humanity', able to live together in a kinder way.

That is the coming of 'the whole Christ'. As Origen put it, this Christ is 'the kingdom of God in person' (αὐτοβασιλεία του θεου: *autobasileia tou theou*). 'Christ' has become the eponymous hero, the figurehead personifying the kingdom as a new humanity, living together in harmony.

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. It was a project for a new society which, of course, was not realised in full, but produced some remarkable achievements. For example, Cuba, a very poor country, set up a national health service that was far in advance of anything in the USA and with great generosity offered doctors to help other countries in crisis. When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, Cuba was one of the first countries to offer aid, proposing to send 1,586 doctors and 26 tons of medicine. For ideological reasons this aid was rejected by the US State Department.

Latin American liberation theology and Christian activists had a significant input into the Nicaraguan Revolution and the idea of 'the new humanity' – with its Pauline connotations of equal moral worth – figured prominently. The outcome was a society that was more pragmatic – with a mixed economy – and more democratic than Cuba. Tomás Borge was Sandinista Interior Minister (Home Secretary) in the revolutionary decade 1979-90; his famous 'revenge' was to forgive his torturers when he came to power: 'My personal revenge will be your children's right to schooling and to flowers...' In an address to the people of Europe he said: 'This is the finest utopia ever conceived in the history of Latin America, the new humanity.' He urged us to embrace that new humanity, so that 'your own mythical ceremonies can be initiated afresh and rise again from their solemn and wonderful burial ground.'

Jerusalem, the Beautiful City

The third 'character' who figures prominently in the Advent liturgy is a city, Jerusalem or Sion. In a poetic vision at the end of the book of Revelation she is personified as Christ's bride:

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, dressed as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying:

See the home of God is among humans,
and he will dwell with them
and they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

This is a vision of a kind and inclusive society where

tears are wiped away. God is with us – Emmanuel. There is no temple in the city. God does not need to be approached 'elsewhere' via a Holy of Holies, his home is on Earth in the beautiful city – all humanity, united male and female form divine. And the city shines: 'The glory of God is its light.' As Irenaeus was to express it in the second century: *gloria Dei vivens homo*: the glory of God is the living human being.

One of the visionaries inspired by the book of Revelation was the London poet William Blake in his long poem *Jerusalem* (1804-20). In a lyric section within the poem, for him Jerusalem becomes a transformed London in an imaginary ideal past:

The fields from Islington to Marybone,
To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood,
Were builded over with pillars of gold
And there Jerusalem's pillars stood.

Her little ones ran on the fields,
The Lamb of God among them seen
And fair Jerusalem his Bride
Among the little meadows green...

The lyric begins with a list of familiar London names: Islington, Marylebone, Primrose Hill and St John's Wood and '*there* Jerusalem's pillars stood'. It ends with a vision of the beautiful city we ourselves have to build, that is still in the future:

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

The poetic image of the new Jerusalem is not a political programme but it can inspire the idea of a city, which must be worked out in practice. For example, one of Ken Livingstone's best moments when he was mayor of London was inspired by his vision of London, the city he loves. His vision is purely secular but surely echoes Revelation and Blake's *Jerusalem*. In his speech the day after the London bombing on 7th July 2005 he said:

This was not a terrorist attack against the mighty and the powerful. It was not aimed at presidents or prime ministers. It was aimed at ordinary, working-class Londoners – black and white, Muslim and Christian, Hindu and Jew, young and old ...

Then he continued to the bombers:

In the days that follow look at our airports, look at our sea ports and look at our railway stations, and even after your cowardly attack, you will see that people from the rest of Britain, people from around the world will arrive in London to become Londoners and to fulfil their dreams and achieve their potential. They choose to come to London, as so many have come before, because they come to be free, they come to live the life they choose, they come to be able to be themselves.



Pregnant tents of the Occupy camp in St Paul's Churchyard, Advent 2011.

Perhaps that speech prevented revenge attacks on innocent Muslim Londoners.

In the recent EU referendum London, especially inner London, voted overwhelmingly to Remain in Europe, with Blake's own Lambeth topping the poll at 78.6% Remain, followed by Hackney (78.5%), Haringey, Islington and Camden all at 75%. Perhaps these Londoners wanted their city to remain a place where 'in my exchanges every land shall walk'.

I Will Be

Another poet inspired by the divine descent in the book of Revelation was Catholic priest Ernesto Cardenal, who became Minister of Culture in the same Sandinista government in which Tomás Borge was Interior Minister. In his *Oracle upon Managua* Cardenal says:

After all God is also City..
 A classless city
 the free city
 where God is everybody
 He, God-with-everybody (Emmanuel)
 the universal City
 the City where God's humanity is revealed to us...

God is the vision of a kind humanity:

And Yahweh said: I am not.
 I will be. I am the one who will be, he said.
 I am Yahweh a God who waits in the future
 (who cannot be unless the conditions are right)
 God who is not but who WILL BE
 for he is love-among-humans
 and he is not, he WILL BE.

'I WILL BE' is a succinct expression of faith in God as an 'emergent property'. In the poem, not only is the reign of God the beautiful city on Earth, but God *is* the human city. God has emptied himself into humanity – humanity fulfilling its potential (which has not yet happened). God is 'love-among-humans', he 'waits in the future' and 'cannot be unless the conditions are right.' At present 'he is not, he WILL BE'. Not only do we have to build Jerusalem, the beautiful city, but because God *is* the City we have to create God. That is to say we have to *realise* on Earth what we imagined in a poetic vision.

The Great *O* Antiphons

The Advent liturgy culminates in the seven great 'O antiphons' to Mary's Magnificat at Evensong (Vespers), each of them yearning: 'O... come'. We have room only to quote three of them. The first is:

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 to take care.

Here I think 'take care' (*viam prudentiae* in the Latin) can be read, not as being cautious, but as looking after people and things. At the winter solstice on December 21st the antiphon 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.

On the streets of London today and elsewhere we see homeless people sitting in the dark and cold all night, some dying. It is a disgrace. We are still far from realising the reign of kindness, the beautiful city. It is still: 'O come...'

The last of these 'O antiphons' is:

O Emmanuel, our King and lawgiver, Saviour whom the nations await: come and save us, Lord our God.

He, God-with-everybody (Emmanuel)/the universal City/the City where God's humanity is revealed to us... The home of God is with humans on Earth. In the beautiful city humanity comes home.