

COMING AND BECOMING: a meditation on Advent

Some time in late October, a marketing algorithm ticks over somewhere and Christmas begins to appear. Malls are decked, bells are jingled and the little drummer boy begins his constant assault on ears everywhere. In Australia, the last two months of the year are Narnia in reverse: never winter and always Christmas.

There are plenty of essays remarking on the incongruity of the long commercial that is Christmas and the arresting and wondrous story that such clamour obscures. There are, in essence, threnodies on the passing of Christendom. This is not one of those essays.

There is a different point to be made here – not one about time past, but one about seasons present. For the secular world the point of the Christmas that it has inherited is sales and marketing. It is vacation season – the beginning (in Australia) – of the great national shut-down that concludes after the Australia Day long weekend. For the Church, however, Christmas is but one – and the shortest – of the three consecutive seasons that fall at this time: Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. Each has a different theme in the year's narrative: anticipation; arrival; recognition. We await God. God comes. We behold the divine presence.

At the time of writing, Advent has only just commenced. Readings and advent carols encourage us to meditate upon the coming of the Lord – both the historical birth in Bethlehem and the eschatological Parousia at the end of time.

The term “advent” is Latin and can best be translated as “arrival”. In Roman times, it was often used to refer quite specifically to the coming of an emperor into a particular city. These were important occasions. Coins were struck to commemorate the occasions; sculptures created to record them.

During the third century, the emperor (or emperors, because sometimes there was more than one) moved around a lot. Although the city of Rome remained the nominal capital of the Empire, in reality the capital of the Empire was wherever the Emperor happened to be. That meant that the Emperor's arrival in any town was a matter of real consequence. It was not some kind of flying visit such as the Queen or a member of the Royal Family might make nowadays. The Emperors brought with them the entire apparatus of government; bodyguards,

clerks, ministers, advisers, deputies, cooks, barbers, as well as their families and hangers-on. It was not just the emperor who had arrived. A whole town had come to town.



Detail from the Arch of Galerius in Thessaloniki: the adventus of an Emperor to the city of Nisibis (photo: the author)

The arrival of the emperor was marked by a grand parade, in which the centrepiece was the emperor himself seated in a horse-drawn carriage. By the fourth century, protocol required that the emperor display neither emotion nor discomfort but instead carry himself as an effigy of rigid and unyielding power. The symbolism was clear and carefully crafted: citizens and subjects were invited to behold the might of the empire that ruled their lives. They were expected to respond with devotion and with awe and, for the most part, they did.

This kind of advent is qualitatively different from the Christian season of Advent. We await a coming that subverts all conventional images of imperial power. The Lord for whom we wait is not a full-grown man surrounded by soldiers and bureaucrats and all the machinery of state, but a newborn baby, surrounded only by love, completely vulnerable and at the mercy of a merciless world.

It is common enough at this point, and entirely valid, to go on to state that this is where God meets us – in weakness, and not in strength. The paradox is true and there is much to be gained by exploring it, but it is a Christmas paradox, not an Advent one. Advent is not only about where God meets us, but also **when**.

A key lesson of Advent is waiting. Waiting on God is not easy. The early church so expected Christ's imminent return that the letters of Christian scripture feature reassurances that it will happen, but in God's good time, and not ours. Behind the words of the second century letter 2

Peter, for example, we can sense that the author is trying to allay the impatience, even disillusion, arising from the delayed Parousia. Expecting Christ's imminent return, many were disappointed that, despite the promises in which they had placed such faith, the sun still rose every day, the moon waxed and waned as it should, and the stars refused to fall from the heavens. The author of 2 Peter reminds us that God's time and human time are quite different and that, while we can never know either the day or the time, we can be confident that it will occur one day:

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. (2 Peter 3.9 - 10, NRSV)

This sense of a delayed future can tempt us into seeing ourselves as being in a space between "then" and "not yet"—a liminal and unsatisfactory place where the real is foreshadowed but not actual. That can lead to a perception that the life in which we are currently engaged is somehow not quite real because it is not that which has been promised. It is true that we live in the half-light of a fallen world that cries out for completion. C.S. Lewis teases out that implication in his eschatological children's book *The Last Battle* by referring to the world in which we live as "Shadowlands". What he means by this is that our lives, and our world, are partial and imperfect expressions of deepest reality, a reality that is always present behind all things, yet also still to be revealed at the end of all things. This is not an invitation to sit back and allow the world to get on with its imperfections while we pursue an inner perfection. In Lewis' Narnia books, as in his other theology, we are called to both an outer and an inner struggle.

One person who exemplified and wrote about this struggle was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A German intellectual and Lutheran minister in the first half of the 20th century, he was beginning to confront the eschaton and tease out its implications even before Hitler came to power in 1933. In a series of lectures published as *Schöpfung und Fall* Bonhoeffer's took his starting point as the Genesis Creation narrative. In the course of this, he made the significant statement: "The Church of Christ witnesses to the end of things. It lives from the end, it thinks from the end, it acts from the end, it proclaims its message from the end."

As far as Bonhoeffer was concerned, there was no waiting to be done. In his *Ethics*, which he was working on up until his execution in 1945, he makes a curious and important argument. He argues that the ultimate act of history (*das Letzte*) is God's grace in the justification of sinful humanity. The way in which a person arrives at that point is that which is before the ultimate, the penultimate (*das Vorletzte*). Bonhoeffer's concept of "penultimacy" is best understood in the journey of the embodied soul to grace, affirming the necessity of the penultimate, since, he argues, this is where the gospel matters, in human pain and brokenness.*

Put simply, God comes to us. God does not wait for us to be ready: to put on our best clothes, charge our lamps with oil, jostle for places by the road to wave in the divine. Rather, God the Holy Spirit invades us when our faces are dirty with weeping and bloody with pain. That is what grace means: the unmerited blessing of being wrapped in the divine as we grow slowly towards it, as we become the people we were made to be. This advent of God is every bit as real here in the shadowlands as it is in the Kingdom to come. It is our tether to reality, and our ladder of ascent. It is the affirmation that God is both yet to come and already here.

When Jesus was asked when the Kingdom of God was going to come, he answered: "The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed nor will they say 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!'. For, in fact, the Kingdom of God is among you." (Luke 17. 20 – 21, NRSV). This teaching of Jesus is sometimes obscured by the words that follow in the Gospel of Luke about the immediacy and suddenness of the end, but his point there is the same (vv 27 – 37) – that salvation is not through being there at the end, but by losing one's life now (v 33). But the life that he means is the shadow life, the life that is abandoned when the Spirit sweeps in, and we begin to become something real.

The season of Advent may look ahead to the eschaton as it looks back to the Incarnation, but it also looks around at the world of now. The Gospel teaching is simply to treat all times as if they are the end times, for the Kingdom is already here. If we do not know the when of the eschaton, it does not matter. What matters is the now. What matters is the becoming. We

* I am indebted to Professor Mark Lindsay of the University of Divinity for his work on this aspect of Bonhoeffer's thought and his kindness in sharing it with me.

must always be ready to greet the bridegroom. Whatever may happen in God's good time, the coming of Christ must always be now.

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