



Advent Reflections



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First week - 1

For those for who are, not just admirers, but disciples Jesus is the sadguru, the root teacher of the human quest. Faith is relationship. A unique companionship on life's journey rescuing us from isolation while freeing us from suffocation by the crowd. Like any faithful relationship, discipleship evolves, taking many forms, becoming a deeper union, taking us through the worst that can befall us.

As our centre of gravity Jesus identifies us - to ourselves - as 'disciples'. From the Latin *discere*, to learn. Often we see Jesus speaking directly and intimately to his disciples differently from his public voice. He longs to share with us everything he has learned as a disciple to the Father. His longing for us to understand brings a historic religious revolution to discipleship and our sense of God: 'I call you servants no longer but friends, because I have shared with you everything I have learned for the Father.' You cannot fear a friend.

We begin the quest of Advent by listening to what he says about the end of the world, our private world, the planetary world, every kind of world. It is apocalyptic. I have just watched the iconic film about the Vietnam war - Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. Based on Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, the film climaxes with the depiction of the remote upriver settlement in Cambodia where the renegade American Colonel Kurtz presides insanely over a deranged army governed by fear. He is in profound psychic pain, but his mind is frighteningly clear. The horror and atrocities of war pushed him over the edge.

The horror then turned inwards against himself and outwards to the world. Marlon Brando says the famous words 'the horror, the horror' with chilling conviction worse than any horror film.

Jesus warns his disciples to be prepared for the horror. His language should evoke our fear of an ecological apocalypse, the first signs of which we see in the Californian fires, the floods, the deforestation, the plastic-polluted oceans, the change of seasons and melting ice caps. Denial is the first reaction to the fear of death. But the inescapable fear will build, disrupting all relationships. Behind every manifestation of fear is the horror of loss, the death aroused by every loss we undergo. Men die of fear, Jesus says. Because fear deprives us of the capacity for love.

To his disciples he imparts his liberating command. He doesn't say you sinners have much to fear. He says 'do not fear'. Be upright, dignified in your divine humanity. And 'wait'. This is a core teaching of Advent: to learn to wait. Waiting is a learned practice, like meditation.

The best response to the 'horror' of fear is to wait as this releases the hidden resource of hope. Waiting is self-control, care for our mental health and equanimity, avoiding excess, addiction and anxiety: the conscious and hopeful waiting of the disciple not the frenetic impatience of the consumer. Stay conscious, he tells us, and pray at all times. This is the other core theme of Advent: to be in the state of continuous prayer. The daily times of meditation develop this state.

At the beginning of our preparation for Christmas, we have at least learned we are not waiting for Santa Claus.

First week - 2

The clock starts ticking for Christmas.. now.

If we lacked all sense of sacred time life would indeed be a bleak landscape to trudge across. It would become only a tedious cycle of work, holiday, shopping, entertainment, problem-solving, ever running from a gnawing sense of incompleteness or loss. Sacred time pours colour (purple for Advent) over such a monochrome world. It stirs a sense of expectancy, a certainty within uncertainty, an excitement of an imminent revelation of reality that will not disappoint or ever prove to be illusory.

The sacred time of Advent doesn't just promise this: it insists that something or someone real is approaching us across the terrain of life. We play the game of sacred time and learn directly that serious that only play can give. We are waiting to see what or who is coming and deal with the niggling doubt (that easily becomes a bitter pill) that nothing may come and nothing would make our empty waiting more lonely still. If nothing comes, we are alone again. But, if we become less and less burdened by possessions and attachments, then waiting will be reciprocated. Because whoever or whatever is moving through time towards us is waiting for the encounter, the recognition and the embrace that welcomes the new arrival. And whenever it comes it will be – literally – amazing.

Advent offers us a sacred time to reflect, several times daily if we wish, on how consciously we are living. In ordinary life we barely manage to reflect on deeper things for more than a few moments snatched from busyness. Reflection begins with self-questioning. Are we fully accepting the moment we are in or fantasizing about something in the past or future? Are we really waiting? To be truly in the present means to wait, to be real and to know with the wisdom arising in stillness that what we are waiting for has already arrived. This kind of waiting is real hope – not the usual compound of daydreams and desires – but the core certainty that the final outcome has already happened and is waiting to be born in time and circumstances. To reach this state demands a frequently repeated and at times excruciating renunciation of illusion and all self-serving imagination. Illusion re-forms and reappears constantly. Hence, we need a regular practice. And, if we emphasise fidelity to our twice -daily appointment with reality in the next few weeks, it would be time well spent

Are we really waiting? Or, are we running away from the doubt that nothing is happening in this stillness and silence? Waiting is not thinking about our sense of separation or incompleteness, or indulging the fear we will never be whole. Waiting means giving up these obsessive thoughts and feeling and breaking out of the orbit of the fearful ego. It means yielding to the thrill of fulfilment and the heart-melting beauty of Christ being formed in us now and who will, for sure, be born in time. Advent, then, is about waiting for love. But as Rumi said, 'lovers don't just finally meet somewhere. They are in each other all along.'

Second week - 1

It might not seem very important to know that Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene when John the Baptist began to preach repentance. But maybe it does help us remember the historicity of our tradition and the universal need for prophets. The wild prophet of the Jordanian desert is an archetype of all those who call us to our senses, defying the social Establishment, exposing the official denials and evasions, simply saying it as it is even when they are condemned by the authorities as enemies of the people and scapegoated or assassinated.

John is an Advent figure, preparing the way for the appearance of Jesus on the public stage. Advent means literally a 'coming towards'. He is coming towards us and, as we sense that approach, perhaps we start going out to meet him. This is spatial imagery used to describe a spiritual event unlimited by space or time but still happening in human geography and real time.

What is at the heart of the prophet's message? A 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'. For many today, these terms have as much meaning as the language of computer programming. But they evoke important and timeless human needs for meaning, ritual and transformation. Sin is endemic. The world is ravaged by sin, personal and collective, in families, in corporate boardrooms, in pollution of the planet or against the minds of the young.

We might give guilt, shame, sorrow or regret as synonyms for 'repentance'. Not bad reactions, at least for a while, when we acknowledge our sins and the harm we have done to others.

We should do more, however, than just shrug our shoulders and say 'let's move on'. The essential meaning of repentance (*metanoia*) is not just what we do but a change of mind, literally 'beyond mind'. Against the horror of fear and being trapped in destructive patterns of behaviour, nothing less will do than a shift in the very operating system of our attention. It is not a change of belief that we need but a change of perception, not ideology but how and what we see.

This initiates the process of forgiveness within and towards ourselves. It is never easy to see how lost, deceived or self-centred we once were. Recognition of this demands reconciliation with the true self we had rejected. We cannot forgive others the harm they inflicted until we have understood what forgiving ourselves means. 'Why should I forgive myself? He's the one who hurt me!' Maybe - and justice must certainly be seen to be done. But if we are to become whole, it is not enough to be a victim. We need to be healed by a change of perspective, by a new way of seeing the whole situation.

Repentance goes with 'baptism', a visible sign of what is happening within consciousness. This may have explicit religious meaning as in initiation into a new community, which helps keep the change of mind going. But meditation too is a baptism, an immersion in the stream of consciousness. And it has an outward form, visible signs. How we sit, manifest stillness and outer silence, our daily rhythm of morning and evening, are rituals that express and fortify the process of changing our mind, expanding our consciousness. Meditation also expresses the smoothing out and filling in that Isaiah describes, showing us that we are delivered from horror to a new state of health and flourishing.

Second week - 2

Once I was walking in the Australian bush in bright moonlight. As we crossed a stream, stepping carefully from one stone to another, I looked down and saw a tiny strange being looking up at me quizzically from the water. I was shocked but not frightened and stepped back to see it again. But it had gone and I realised (a bit sadly) that it was a trick of the light and my imagination.

The gods left humanity a long time ago. They were banished by science and faded away as we better understood our own unconscious. We can do better at this point of our evolution than trying to recover the old gods. Their disappearance perhaps left the world a duller place. But the new dispensation, the new covenant whose birth we are preparing to celebrate, expels the fears attached to the old order. It is a more free world, a grownup relationship with the divine. Here we learn to wait in joyful hope even in the absence, even in the void. We wait with an imagination empty of images, sensing the real presence that will manifest in everything, everywhere, always.

Humanity is permanently pregnant with this presence. An ordinary human pregnancy teaches the expectant parents that waiting does not equate to delay or postponement. It is preparation and maturing. It is true patience that teaches us that only through time time is conquered. So, there is no reason for impatience while a new form of life grows in whatever kind of womb.

While the mystery grows, ordinary life continues, with shopping, cooking, dealing with builders, talking with friends. But 'all the time the seed grows, how we do not know..' (Mark 4:27). Waiting in fidelity to what is growing is the present moment.

When birth happens the wonder of completion is accompanied by the anxiety of caring for what is now here to be loved but still so vulnerable and delicate. New life is resilient and yet perilously tender. So birth is the end of preparation but the beginning of an endless series of stages of growth. 'Epiktesis' (Phil 3:13) is the Greek word for pushing ever forward. That is what defines a spiritual life, that there is no final goal except the transcendence of every goal as soon as it has been achieved. It may sound tiring but it is the secret of the infinite, boundless expansion of love. It is reflected in the practice of continuously returning to the mantra.

People who first come to meditation with a short-term, goal-oriented mind often speak of it as a 'tool'. Those for whom it has become a way of life, a way into deeper life, think of it more as an on-going relationship, a love story. The poet Rilke wrote that 'even between the closest people infinite distances exist. Aren't lovers always coming to precipices in each other?'

Life and the Advent season reassure us that the marriage of infinity and intimacy is incarnation, full embodiment.

Third week - 1

The world that Jesus was born into was as discontented and made dysfunctional by institutional injustice as any. The times of optimism and boundless hope are few and short-lived. The election of a Kennedy or an Obama, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the heady days of a political revolution inspired by ideals or the immediate aftermath of a war, wedding days, all new beginnings are occasions to believe the impossible and forget how all previous such hopes were disappointed. It is the poor who buy lottery tickets.

Social sins – such as we have embedded in our financial systems that send luxury house prices rocketing while increasing numbers, even in affluent societies, can barely house and feed their families – drain the spirit and disempower the will. In such despair, the people came out to John asking simply ‘what shall we do?’

John the Baptist is Advent, actively waiting for the Messiah. In response to the people’s question, he confronts the injustices and social sins of his time that oppressed the lives but also the souls of those who came to the desert to hear him. They wondered about him, hoping that he may be the saviour who will right all wrongs and re-establish the order of justice. The unhappy are always looking for a messiah. He is not, nor even a social revolutionary. He tells the tax collectors not to extract more than their due and soldiers not to use their power to exploit and intimidate. How many societies today, rife with corruption in politics, judiciary and police, could he not have said this to? It is the bare minimum for justice. And it cannot be separated from the spiritual dimension – as St Oscar Romero came to understand. Nor can we draw a red line

between our meditation and the way we live, vote, spend our disposable income and relate to the problems of the day.

I once gave a retreat to priests in the Philippines from a very poor and remote part of the country. The seminary where we gathered was as minimal as many of the homes of the people and the priests who served them. I remember the sink in my room fell off the wall when I touched it and I felt bad about causing them more expense. As I spoke individually with the priests, I realised what true servants of the people they were, caring for their material rights and needs, defending their dignity, as well as nourishing their religious and spiritual lives.

On a visit to Venezuela I met a smart young businessman. He travelled frequently to the US to arrange the flow of luxury items back to customers at home who had the money to pay. Most people even then scraped and struggled humiliatingly for bare necessities. What disturbed me more, though, was his blank refusal to discuss the social situation or politics at all. It was the ‘public’ sphere and he had enough to do in his own ‘private’ world. When I pushed him, he justified his attitude by saying of the politicians ‘they’re all the same.’ It was the logic of the jungle badly wrapped.

When Jesus finally appears on the scene he will be, like John, a prophet excoriating injustice, defending the defenceless passionate for justice. This may have been the actual cause of his downfall more than his truly revolutionary spiritual revelation. But he will be more than a prophet. His word will show humanity a radical new social system attuned to the presence of God in all things. This alignment of the inner and outer worlds, harmonising the political and the mystical, he calls the Kingdom. To hear this, to listen, to wait and to pray and to stay awake is to be ‘baptised with the Spirit and fire’. The proof is that it will burn us.

Third week - 2

Here in the Northern hemisphere we are approaching the nadir of the year, December 21st, the shortest day. Nadir comes from an Arabic word meaning 'opposite', referring here to the opposite of the zenith, which is the highest point in the celestial sphere. The nice thing about opposites is that when you get all the way to the end you meet the other coming towards you – which is what Advent is about too.

If you're in the southern hemisphere, the same date is the longest day. From this point the days get lighter or darker, longer or shorter. It's hard to believe, deep in a Northern winter, that the days are really getting longer but they are and eventually you have to believe it. So also in the cyclical revolution of our own lives, ascends merge into new beginnings and periods of darkness and hopelessness generate a new dawn. All we have to do is stay the course, persevere till the end, and the transformation happens. As the rabbi said, 'God does not expect us to be perfect but we are not allowed to give up.'

St John says that 'God is light and in God there is no darkness at all' (1Jn 1:5). This is a fundamental Christian insight into the divine paradox where opposites are united. For every statement we make about God we have to allow for the opposite. What seems so often like an enemy, a disrupter or a negation is quickly rejected. But in our impatience and insecurity we miss the bounce effect when the meeting of opposites brings about a truly happy marriage.

God who is light is also complete darkness, whom 'no one has ever seen or can see', living in a light that 'no one can even come near' (1 Tim 6:16). As the union of opposites, God is light and darkness. This union is the absolute nature of peace, not as the world gives it' but as God pours it out beyond understanding. We prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus at the bounce-point when the shortest grows and the darkest becomes lighter.

Yes, God reveals himself but He also hides in what He reveals. This happened when the Godhead poured himself into the human vessel of Jesus. Some glimpsed, some guessed, some saw for a moment but couldn't trust what they felt. But others were shocked and frightened at what was being revealed not just to them but within them. That fear leads to the greatest of all rejections of reality. The Christmas story contains this dark shadow cast by the intense light when it is blocked.

Does this encounter with paradox help us to move into 'enlightenment'? Surely, we pray, meditate, act, think and talk so we can better understand, see more. Or do we? Perhaps we meditate not to see more clearly or understand the mystery better so that we can better become the mystery, by sharing in the nature of God. Enlightenment is not about seeing the light but becoming the light.

In the presence of darkness we must emit and radiate the light of our own spirit, which is never less than the light of God. This light penetrates our darkest moments and deeds. At the end of the cycle, light is irresistible. Darkness can bear to resist no longer and that is what makes Christmas happy.

Forth week - 1

The gospels of the past three weeks have had a male cast, reflecting the male-dominated world of the middle-eastern culture into which the long-awaited Jesus would be born. This gospel shifts completely to the world of women and two expectant women who have learned Advent – to wait, to pray and to have their minds changed.

St Luke is, for his time, unusually, maybe uniquely attuned to women, the poor and marginal and children – all those in the world of their time who were habitually overlooked or devalued. His attention to them reflects the good news of Jesus that seen in the light of God there simply are no marginal, no second-class, no disposable groups. Our contemporary concern – in what is left of liberal democracy – for minorities, equal rights for women and economic justice can also, even if at less depth of understanding, reflect this wisdom of universal equality. So, even if nature is not fair in the way it hands out its gifts, humans can be just in the way they protect and respect the least fortunate.

Despite cultural differences, justice is an inborn instinct arising from the essential goodness of human nature. This goodness is God. It reveals the capacity of the human to be divinised just as the child that leapt in Elizabeth's womb in the presence of the embryo in Mary's testifies to the divine capacity to become flesh. In Advent, we may not be sure whether we are coming to God or God is coming to us and the conclusion must be both movements are inseparable.

Centuries of paintings of the Visitation show the girl Mary and the older woman Elizabeth embracing each other. When John, Elizabeth's child leapt, Mary her kinswoman heard another declaration of the meaning of her own baby. Again she says nothing, barely understanding anything of the mystery she has been engulfed in.

At the Annunciation Mary only said yes. In the stories of the birth, the exile and the return to Nazareth, she is silent. She rebukes the boy Jesus for causing her anxiety when he disappears in the Temple and she speaks to him at the wedding feast. Otherwise her luminous presence in the gospels is silent, conscious, concerned, committed even at the foot of the Cross, to the one she and the world had waited for. Her silence in the presence of mystery is the model of contemplation for our own time that often veers between reductionism and superstition.

Of course we know little or nothing of the historic origins of symbolic stories like these and we never will. But we are no less capable of being awakened and moved by the reality they expose. The Advent mind is holistic, open to profound and beautiful, evocative symbols that convey truth intuitively and directly. We feel something leap in us but we can't yet see it fully.

Advent after all is about gestation, the experience of an unseen presence in the womb of our spirit. This is powerful in itself – as is our quiet meditation in which the process of growth is largely known only through its fruits. Birth is another stage of reality's self-revelation proving what we knew without knowing. But even birth doesn't settle the matter because it opens the mystery even wider.

Forth week - 2

What is extraordinary about the Nativity story is how ordinary it is – leaving aside the host of angels and the visit of the Three Kings which we can take as being symbolic add-ons. They symbolise, though, just how wonderful is this new member of the human species – one of those who justify our calling ourselves *homo sapiens*. But the wonder glows in the ordinary, like Christmas tree lights when you walk into a darkened living-room

Jesus did not come from a poverty-stricken family but an artisan class, not a royal prince or part of any elite. Not finding a room at an inn when there is a big conference in town has happened to many others. He was born in a manger, which could mean a 'place for sheep'. Later authors described it as a cave. Caves are ancient symbols of an encounter with God. Origen thought it might have been a cave where sheep were kept, perhaps on an old site of the god Tammuz, patron of shepherds. Whatever the facts, shepherds are strongly in the symbolic picture. Jesus later called himself the 'good shepherd' and the oldest artistic representation of him is as a young shepherd carrying the lost sheep over his shoulders. Although in ancient Israel, when they were nomads, shepherds had a good public image, by the time of Jesus they had become a despised class. From the circumstances of his birth, all this suggests, Jesus was equally able to handle the rich and powerful but was preferentially turned towards the poor and the marginalised.

The eternal Word that became flesh in a cave in Bethlehem also forms and takes shape in us through our daily lives.

Everything we do, think, say, everything that just happens to us and evokes a response, consciously or otherwise, has an influence on this formation. St Paul, as a spiritual guide to his communities, experienced the pains of childbirth as 'Christ is formed in you' (Gal 4:19). It is a birthing, an embodiment of the Selfhood of God, that takes place in the deepest part of us; and yet it is felt by those with whom we live, especially those who have a special concern for us – as we for them. This is the experience both of personal intimacy and of community.

Br Lawrence, a Carmelite lay brother in a busy monastery in Paris in the 17th century, was renowned for his depth of experience of God's presence. It radiated from him and he led others to awaken to it. He had to go to the market every day and haggle over the price of the groceries and then supervise a busy kitchen. He said he felt the presence more strongly there than in church. The continuous sense of the presence of Christ is the goal of meditation and of Advent which now culminates in the season of Christmas. The message is, don't become too pious, too self-conscious, too artificially elitist about your mindful living in the birth of the Word. Brother Lawrence understood the amazing revelation of God in the ordinary and that it doesn't mean we have to become special holy looking people, just our true selves: 'We should apply ourselves unceasingly to this one end, to so rule all our actions that they may be little acts of communion with God; but they must not be studied, they must come naturally, from the purity & simplicity of the heart.'

As the Word becomes flesh in our bodies, minds, feelings and all our relationships, more and more of who I am becomes embodied in the Word. Which is, of course the main reason we say 'happy Christmas' not just 'happy holidays'. Happy Christmas!

Reflections by Laurence Freeman OSB



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