

what extent we have helped. Just occasionally a thoughtful fellow worker will tell us later how much perhaps we have helped. Only recently I had news of a forty-year old married woman with whom a medical social worker felt she had accomplished nothing. At the time worker and patient met, Mrs G. was chairbound and incontinent. Discussions of practical help, and experiments with this and that device to mitigate the effects of her incontinence were unsuccessful. But in the process, worker and patient did share the patient's feeling of intense disgust and shame at her condition and the worker's sorrow at having no practical solution. Although several times Mrs G. said it wasn't any use talking any more, three years later when she entered hospital again and died, her new medical social worker realised that this seemingly fruitless sharing had helped her a very great deal.

But not knowing for sure, having very little scientific and objective evidence and yet having a profound conviction that our relationships do matter and can be therapeutic, is just one part of the social worker's job. I do not mean by this that we shouldn't try to understand, or that evaluation of work is unnecessary. On the contrary, I believe both are absolutely vital. But clear-cut results are hard to come by and we must not be disappointed at this. There is an intangible quality in our relationships which makes it necessary to be very open and ready for new developments and for experiment. Provided we have understood the meaning of relationship we can confidently move forward to use it resourcefully and dynamically, and the results can be surprising.

## I Come Quickly

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There was a day when you could have heard it said that theologians knew nothing about the liturgy, and conversely, that liturgists knew very little theology. That misinformed attitude has disappeared, and it is now recognized that theological and liturgical studies enrich and complement one another. There cannot be two Gods—one for theologians, another for liturgists. The Church simultaneously instructs our

minds through dogma and our hearts through symbol. The liturgy would be no more than exaggerated drama without roots deep in the truths theology defends and explains; and were it not for the living contact with Truth found in the liturgy, theology would be only an elaborate system of religious mathematics.

One consequence of this necessary and dynamic interaction between theology and the liturgy is that many of the problems encountered in the worship of God find their solution in theological principles. During Advent we come face to face with just this kind of a problem, a difficulty the liturgy unfolds in all its fullness. It is an issue touching each of us deeply because it centres around our idea of the Messiah. The question Advent raises is how to bring time and eternity together, how to draw near to the unchangeable, eternal God who has entered the world of flux and change. To resolve the difficulty we have to understand what is involved in God's eternity, and that is the work of theology.

During the days of Advent there is a steady crescendo—muffled at first but growing ever stronger—mounting up to the announcement of the 'gracious coming of Jesus Christ, eternal God and Son of the eternal Father.' Advent: the purpose of the liturgy is to prepare us, to ready us, to sharpen our anticipation for the coming. *Excita Domine, potentiam tuam et veni*: 'O Lord, stir up your power and come' (Ps. 79. 2), the Church prays on each of the four Sundays of Advent. John the Baptist preaches of one who is to come after him. Isaiah's burning prophecies and the restless hopes of the psalms haunt the divine office. *O Adonai, O Oriens*, and finally, *O Emmanuel, veni ad salvandum nos*, we call. Expectation rises. On the Vigil of the Nativity we chant: 'This day you shall know that the Lord is coming, and tomorrow you shall see his glory' (Ex. 16. 6-7). And finally on Christmas Day, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (Ps. 117. 26).

What is the coming for which we have been preparing, the advent for which we have been holding ourselves in readiness?

St Bernard, meditating upon the liturgical texts of Advent, recognized that the Church is preparing for a threefold coming of Christ: 'In the first, he came in flesh and weakness; in the second, he comes in spirit and power; in the third, he comes in glory and majesty. And his second coming is the way for us to pass from the first time he comes among us to the third and final time' (*Advent Homily V, PL 183, 50*). Advent commemorates Christ's miraculous birth in the stable; it celebrates the mystery of his presence among us; and at the same time

it looks forward to his triumphant and victorious parousia. Throughout the season of preparation the Church moves back and forth with great freedom among the three comings—historical, spiritual, eschatological—often combining them all within one prayer. The hymn for Advent matins devotes stanzas to each aspect of the triple coming, and they are all telescoped together in the collect for the mass of the Nativity Vigil: ‘O God, who makes us happy each year with the expectation of our redemption, grant that we who now joyfully receive your only-begotten Son as our redeemer may also without fear see him coming as our judge.’

Here is where the difficulty arises. Of the first coming at Bethlehem we can say: ‘Yes, but the Nativity, wonderful as it is, is something far in the past. It has been thousands of years since Christ was born. Now he is glorified. Are we supposed to pretend that he still hasn’t come into the world?’

The second coming, Christ’s entry into our lives here and now, also presents a problem. People think: ‘But Christ is already with us. He came when we were baptized, and he has been with us ever since. How can he come to us now, and how are we supposed to long for his coming?’

The third coming, that final moment when Christ crushes forever the prince of this world, is no easier to understand. You hear this objection: ‘The Last Judgment is hidden far in the future. It is certainly not going to happen in our lifetime. Are we supposed to be praying for the end of the world on December the twenty-fifth?’

Are we just playing with words when we talk about the coming of the Messiah? What is our prolonged preparation for? The problem arises from a misunderstanding of the difficulty which is at the heart of the liturgy for Advent, the paradox which a theological explanation of God’s eternity will unlock.

There is a misunderstanding, in the first place, because we live in a time-world, a universe of coming-to-be and passing away. We translate reality in terms of our own experience, one event succeeding another. Time is the natural human frame of reference; there is nothing wrong in our thinking in terms of it. The danger arises when we allow ourselves to be tyrannized by time, thinking only in terms of the temporal. Because we are time-bound, we may easily forget that God is beyond time, that he transcends our limited spheres, that his world has no horizons.

God is eternal because he infinitely surpasses the world of change. It

is impossible that God should ever change and still be God. His perfection is infinite, all-embracing: what can he gain? His dominion is universal, he is the Lord God of hosts: who can take anything from him? Our changing, constantly fluctuating human condition—measured and clocked by time—is what sets us apart from the serene life of God. We pass from childhood to dust, we have our bread to earn, there is nothing we have not received. Only God is everlasting and changeless.

Eternity is a difficult concept for us to get used to since we are necessarily immersed in the flow of time from yesterday, through today, and on into tomorrow. We are tempted to think of the eternal as something continuous and successive, something which always keeps going, forever running parallel to the line of time. That is like saying that God is eternal because he was there to begin the world and because he will still be there to bring it to an end. Rather than imagining eternity quantitatively—a line stretching parallel with past, present, and future—it is more accurate to think of it in terms of a single point. Illustrating this idea in a striking phrase, St Thomas suggests we consider eternity as 'the *now* standing still' (*Summa Theol.* I. 10. 2 ad. 1).

To help us visualize this staggering notion beyond all experience, John of St Thomas uses the figure of a tree so large as to stretch over all the swirling waters of a river and to be contemporaneous with them all. Or for another image you might picture the day-by-day sequence of history as an immense mural. We in time walk along beside it, so we can see only one event, then another. The vantage point of eternity, however, gives God the perspective from which to see the whole panorama.

What bearing does this discussion of eternity have on the problem with which we began, the paradoxical triple coming of Christ, which seems not to be a coming at all? Quite simply it is this: St Paul, in his epistle to Titus (read at Midnight Mass) urges us to be temperate, pious, and just, 'looking for the blessed hope and glorious coming of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us that he might redeem us . . .' (2. 12-15). Who is it who comes? In each coming the person is the same: our great Saviour, Jesus Christ, God and man. As man, the Word of God was born in the 'fullness of time' (Gal. 4. 4). He shared our temporal world, and his redemptive actions can be dated and circumscribed by time. But that is not all. It was the eternal Son of God who redeemed us, and even though he stepped into the course of time to accomplish it, his birth, death, and triumph are always included in the eternal decree of God. The mystery of divine love is temporally

expressed at Bethlehem, but it is also eternally and constantly present in the depths of the Godhead.

This has profound implications for each of us personally and is the reason the Church has woven the three comings of Christ into the fabric of the Advent liturgy. The union of human and divine in the person of the Word is a mystery theologians will never be able to fully penetrate. Nevertheless, the fusion of temporal and eternal in Christ is a truth central to our Faith, and during Advent the Church tries to bring us to a deeper knowledge and love of this mystery by freeing our minds from slavery to time. For us on earth there is no 'now standing still', but by praying in the awareness of God's eternity we see more of the depth and grandeur of his infinite love for us.

Now we can answer the difficulties about Christ's first coming so long ago in Bethlehem. Everything is present at once to the mind of God: everything—and everyone—is always and forever included in his eternal decree. This means that the birth of the Son of God, the promised Redeemer, is present to him now. It also means that we—the reason for that redemptive birth—are present in the eternal now, that we have always been present in the mind of God. God has known us, he has called us by name from all eternity. As long as God has been (he is without beginning), he has loved us.

That is most important for it is the justification and explanation of our response to the historical coming of Christ presented in the liturgy. During Advent when we take as our own the cries of a sad but hopeful Jewish people for their long-awaited Messiah, when we trace prophecies to their fulfillment, we are not merely commemorating an event which took place in a far country two thousand years before we were born. We were present in that stable to the mind of the Word of God who lay wrapped in swaddling clothes. We were as present to him as the shepherds hurrying across the hills, or the angels choring his glory. We can even say that we *are* present to him then. Why? This child was God, and he had become man for our redemption. 'The Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself up for me' (Gal. 2. 20).

There is nothing in God but love—eternal love. On God's part we were at the very heart of his Incarnation, the reason for it all. Advent offers us the chance to respond to that eternal love by sharing in the original anticipation and longing for his coming, by realizing anew that we are redeemed by his coming.

St Bernard, preaching during Advent, often pointed out that Christ's second coming—his spiritual coming—is not sharply distinct from the

other two aspects of the liturgical *adventus* but mirrors and serves as a bridge between them. Christ's sanctifying presence in our lives is hidden and humble like his birth, but at the same time it is the real beginning of the glory someday to be ours. As Christ grows within our souls and so is able to come to us with greater power, the eternal Word of God is accomplishing the redemption he began on that holy night.

Christ has already come to us. We have received his grace in baptism, and our strength comes from his other sacraments. But it is also true—and this needs to be stressed—that the whole history of the world is the story of Christ's continued and mysterious advent into the hearts of all men. He has come, yes, but until the end of time, as long as men are working out their salvation he remains 'He who is to come'. As Jean Daniélou writes:

We live always during Advent, we are always waiting for the Messias to come. He has come, but is not yet fully manifest . . . Just as Christ was born according to the flesh in Bethlehem of Juda so must He be born according to the spirit in each of our souls. The whole mystery of the spiritual life is that Jesus is forever being born in us. We have got to be always transforming ourselves into Christ, taking on the dispositions of His heart, the judgments of His mind . . . In the same way Christ has not fully come in regard to mankind as a whole . . . There are whole stretches of humanity in which Christ has never been born (*Advent*, New York 1951, pp. 109-110).

There is something more—the most important of all—to be said about Christ's spiritual advent. The reason the Church passes back and forth among the three comings during this season is that she wants to free us from imprisonment in time's rigid categories. She tries in a special way to have us share the eternal life of God—his unchanging love—by drawing past and future together into the present. We should keep the eternity of God in mind at mass where the three advents converge: the historical crucifixion is commemorated, the same divine and eternal victim is offered here and now for our sins, and his glorified body is a pledge of the joy of the parousia. The Church tells us: live in the present, where the redemption won for you long ago is now taking place, and where your future glory is merited and secured. Henry Suso echoed that theme: 'Be steadfast; never rest content until you have obtained the *now* of eternity as your present possession in this life, so far as a man is capable of it.' Advent should give us a deep appreciation of the importance of each successive moment—an eternal act, either of worship and love or else of selfishness and blindness. For ever and ever

Herod's hate tries to kill the Son of God; for ever and ever there is the glory of the loving awe of the Magi; and every moment in our time-sequence must be either the one or the other.

What of Christ's final advent, his parousia? Is it only a remote event wrapped in the obscure future? Once again time is not the important thing. 'Of that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. Take heed, watch and pray, for you do not know when the time is' (Mk. 13. 32-33). What you do know, however, is what Christ announces in solemn tones in the gospel for the first Sunday of Advent: when the Son of Man comes upon the clouds with great power and majesty to pass eternal judgment, 'He will send forth his angels with a trumpet and a great sound, and they will gather his elect from the four winds . . .' (Matt. 24. 30-31). He will gather his elect on his right hand, which is to say that they will share his triumph for all eternity, 'transformed into his very image from glory to glory' (2 Cor. 3. 18). To rise with him at the trumpet's call, to be gathered among the elect, to share his everlasting life—this is our great hope as Christians.

*Adveniat regnum tuum*: that is our daily prayer, but it is especially the petition of these weeks of preparation. At the very beginning of her liturgical year the Church tries to bring us to see all things as God sees them, from the heights of the everlasting hills. *Adveniat regnum tuum*: it is in the present we work to fulfil that prayer in our own lives. We are saved, but only in hope. In fear and trembling we must work out our salvation, always looking forward to the glorious coming of our Saviour. It is in the sacramentalized present we feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty. It is now, today, that we find Jesus in the least of his brethren. And by sanctifying the present moment and mirroring the life of God we learn a tremendous secret: somehow we are sharing the eternal life of the incarnate Word. Our acts of love and mercy to him have transcended time. They shine like stars for all eternity. We have sown bare grain in time, but 'what is sown corruptible, rises incorruptible; what is sown unhonoured, rises in glory; what is sown in weakness, is raised in power' (1 Cor. 15. 42-43).

In the final lives of the New Testament, bringing the whole of revelation to its climax, Christ calls out: 'Behold, I come quickly. And my reward is with me, to render to each one according to his works. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end . . . It is true, I come quickly.' And we answer, 'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.' (Apoc. 22. 12-20).