

Advent is a time of waiting – something that human beings have never liked doing very much. Our contemporary society is positively waiting-phobic: everything must be instant and immediate. Whether by credit if you haven't got the ready money, or by download, if you find the post too slow, or by e-mail if you want an answer straight away. The most gruesome waiting is perhaps on the phone, trying to get in touch with a real live human being and having to listen to endlessly repeated mindless muzak and being told every now and then by a recorded voice that: "Your call is important to us..." Or: "You are thirty-second in the queue." Or: "You now have nine options" – they're not options, they're choices of punishment.

The waiting of Advent, however, is very different: it is a *hope* and an *expectation*. There's no hope or expectation in being thirty-second in the queue. Advent is a time of being attentive and of hushed awareness. The images I associate with the past Advents of my childhood include a darkness that was somehow holy, candlelight and firelight, a half-built crib and the advent wreath flickering in the shadows of the church. The air breathed expectation during that season. The images flung at us now include self-basting turkeys and fairy lights.

I have not, I believe, become a curmudgeon in my advancing age: I still relish the spiritual and literal twilight of the Advent season, I continue to be nourished by the inward and outward preparations; but those people who think that

Christmas is *not* all about ‘feasting and indulgence’ – as a Lakeland Kitchen catalogue once put it – have long since ceased to be a significant influence in our society. In many ways, this makes our role in life clearer: in Jesus’ own words, we are to be the yeast in the dough to leaven it all through, we are to be the salt that gives it savour, the light that enables it to see in the darkness. This is a task we can embrace wholeheartedly.

Advent is a time of listening. We have an ear cocked for the sound of the Lord’s footfall – in home, church, forest or wilderness, wherever we happen to be, we strain to hear his coming. Because life itself is Advent, every moment of life is Advent, whether we recognise it or not. The modern-day Lutheran writer Fredrich Buechner puts it beautifully:

“In the silence of a midwinter dusk, there is a sound so faint that for all you can tell it may be only the sound of the silence itself. You hold your breath to listen. You are aware of the beating of your heart. The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.”

This encapsulates the identity of Advent: it is ‘just before it happens.’ It is just before the curtain goes up on the first act of a play, just before the leader of the orchestra comes on stage, just before the soloist stands to sing her first line, just before the fingers of the pianist come down on the piano keys, just before a new-born babe utters its first cry.

For me, once, it was a solitary child playing with a single toy, unnoticed and un-regarded. The deep poignancy of the image and its piercing beauty took me into time ‘just before it happens’; before what? Before the sudden realisation that Christ was being born in that moment. Look for such moments – or let them find you – because the world turns on their significance.

Advent is the moment ‘just before’ Christ leaps down from eternity into time, to be born in the Bethlehem of our heart. For Meister Eckhart said:

“Because the same One, who is begotten and born of God the Father, without ceasing, in eternity, is born today, within time, in human nature, we have a feast and a holiday to celebrate it. This birth is *always* happening; and yet, my dear brothers and sisters, if it does not *happen in me*, what difference does it make to me? The birth must happen in me – everything depends on that.”

In Advent we are listening, waiting and expecting – and living in the moment ‘just before it happens’ – the birth of the Lord within us. In the realm that we call archetypal, the transcendent reality beyond time, Advent is *always* happening – it is never *not* happening. Christ is never not being born, never not dying and rising again. It happens in everything that exists from a blade of grass to a galaxy, with neither beginning nor end. It is. Every great spiritual truth exists beyond the prison of linear time and space. Yet we

have to be poor in spirit to realise this. The German theologian killed by the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote:

“The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come.”

Because if we are already untroubled, spiritually rich and perfect, we have no need for Christ to be born in our heart; indeed, like the inn, there would be no room for him there. It would be too crammed with self-congratulation. What we are waiting for, with empty hearts, in the moment just before it happens, with hushed expectation, is the birth within us of the Lord whom the Sufi mystics call the Divine Beloved. It is he who fills every tiny corner of our wayward hearts with his light and grace. And when we have this inwardly, we will see it outwardly, in this ridiculous, materialistic, darkened, wounded, blindsided but still amazingly beautiful and joy-filled world that both veils and reveals the One who fills it with himself.