

As we saw last week, Advent is above all a time of waiting; and we also noted how impatient our contemporary western society is. But when we have to wait for something good, it's all the more wonderful when it arrives. Waiting for something both delays and enhances. Waiting teaches us patience and thankfulness. When everything is immediate, instantaneous and this-minute, gratitude usually goes out of the window. Ease of acquisition makes for indifference. And yet living life in a spirit of thankfulness is both a cause and an effect of an authentic spirituality. No saint, no advanced soul and none of God's *anawim* – his beloved little ones, the poor in spirit – was ever ungrateful.

When we are waiting for something we are in a sense unoccupied; we may have a hundred-and-one things to do, but our waiting heart is an empty space until what we are waiting for comes. There is a lovely poem by Lawrence Hall that makes this point beautifully:

Advent remains at peace, unoccupied  
There are no Advent trees to buy or steal  
No seasonally-discounted lingerie  
No Advent hymns background the lite-beer ads

At Mass: a wreath, a candle every week  
And music set to God, not to the sales;  
The missal now begins again, page one  
And through the liturgy so too do we

Almost no on notices this season, and thus Advent remains at peace, unoccupied.

The waiting that is Advent is also a time of peace, then, a time of being quiet and still yet very aware and alert, unoccupied in the deepest chamber of our heart by anything other than this. It is the season of 'Already and Not Yet' – as the kingdom itself.

Advent is a time of humility – not ours, but God's; most of us have for so long misunderstood the real meaning of humility that our efforts at it sometimes score 9.5 on the Uriah Heep scale. The humility I think of is completely natural, it is unselfconscious and unmanufactured – like the innate humility of a child who knows there are so many things he does not understand – and it characterises the Christmas story: everything it speaks of is smallness, lowliness, un-remarkableness. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

“And this is the wonder of all wonders, that God loves the lowly.... he is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. (···) He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, he loves the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken.”

Humility and glory, littleness and greatness, dignity and lowliness are all there in the gospel narrative because they need each other. The divine was there *because* the human

was, the kings were there *because* the shepherds were, the angels were there *because* the animals were. The ox, the ass and the lamb made the cherubim and seraphim possible. One without the other is unthinkable. There is no mystery, no true awesomeness, no radiance, where there is no humility. The extraordinary will only ever be found in the ordinary – because beyond our limited vision, they are not opposites but complementarities.

The unoccupied waiting and humility of Advent is not an end in itself – in fact, it isn't an end at all, but a beginning. Outwardly, concretely, liturgically, yes – the Nativity brings Advent to a conclusion; but not in the spiritual, symbolic, psychological, *inward* sense, which transcends anything outward, 'out there' in history and time. The contemporary spiritual writer Frederick Buechner, said:

“For outlandish creatures like us, on our way to a heart, a brain, and courage, Bethlehem is not the end of our journey but only the beginning - not home, but the place through which we must pass if ever we are ever to reach home at last.”

This is because the countless Advents and Nativities that we celebrate here on earth in linear time are only a reflection of the Eternal Advent and the Eternal Nativity which are never *not* happening. In the archetypal reality of eternity, Advent and the Nativity – and every other liturgical season rooted in the life of Christ – simply *is*. It is never not. The Thief of all hearts chooses to be born in the poverty and

shadows of the human heart, therefore every heart is a Bethlehem manger; this is why Meister Eckhart said: “The Eternal Word leaps down from heaven to be born in time; but what good is that if it doesn’t happen in me?”

This is really the key to approaching an understanding of any great spiritual mystery – to *look within*. Carl Jung said that whoever looks outside, dreams; whoever looks inside, awakens.” The mysteries of Christ’s life live in us; we celebrate them in time, year after year, but they can only be *experienced* inwardly, within our own self. If we can contemplate and understand the Advent story and the birth of Christ at Bethlehem with an inward eye, with the eye of our heart rather than our mind, then it will also speak to us inwardly, in a very deep, rich silence... and we shall become drawn into the *mystery* of it. This is greatly needed in our day. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “The lack of mystery in our modern life is our downfall and our poverty. The Nativity, like all the mysteries of faith, can be lived in time but is has its being in eternity... and time is always a pale reflection of eternity. As St Paul said, “now we see in a mirror, darkly, but then we shall see face-to-face in light”.