

To me, it scarcely seems any time at all that I emerged to shake my fist at a hot summer sun – for one or two days, at least – and then creep back into the shadows. Now here we are in the second Sunday of Advent. I surely can't be the only one to feel that time itself seems to be going faster than ever. Impossible, I know, but I *feel* it and it's a rather disconcerting feeling.

This is a matter on which the mystics and the scientists seem to be using different language to say the same thing.

Einstein said: "This world is an illusion, but it's a very persistent one." Quantum theory, particle theory, string theory – all the cutting-edge theories of contemporary physics demonstrate that the world we think we know is only a pale reflection of a more-encompassing reality that we hardly know at all.

The 13th century Sufi mystic and poet Jalal Rumi said:

"I saw that we are God's shadow, and the world is our shadow."

And Ken Wilbur, a modern scientist and mystic, said:

"...(but) the new physics was forced to be aware of the fact that it was dealing with shadows and illusions, not reality."

St Thérèse of Lisieux said: "Time is a mirage, an illusion. Already God sees us in glory."

And Woody Allen, who is neither a physicist nor a mystic, once said:

"Photons have mass? I never even knew they were Catholic."

We get the idea: both science and religion teach that there is a far more authentic reality that mostly we cannot know, but to which

we and all things belong, of which this world we see around us is a pale and partial reflection.

In this world of pale and partial reflection, we celebrate Advent every year and prepare for the coming of Christ; in the authentic reality, Advent is never *not* happening – our cycles of linear earthly time simply express it, reflect it. Christ is never *not* being born – two thousand years of celebrating the Feast of the Nativity only make it visible in this world of illusion and shadow. It can only ever be an *inward* experience.

Meister Eckhart said in a sermon in Cologne Cathedral at Christmas 1302:

“We are celebrating the feast of the Eternal Birth which God the Father has borne and never ceases to bear in all eternity... But is this doesn't take place in me, what use is it? Everything depends on this: that Christ should be born in me.”

Every human heart must be the Bethlehem manger.

In Advent we wait – it is a time of waiting. And, by and large, human beings are not too fond of waiting. We have been spoilt, of course: if there is a fifteen second delay between the tinned tomatoes of the customer in front of you, and your dry-aged fillet steak, they apologise for keeping you waiting.

However, in Advent we are waiting for something very special, something that has always been promised, something that has never *not* been given in the realms beyond time and space. This is one of

the essential paradoxes of Advent: while we are waiting for God, God is already with us in the waiting itself. This is why the Kingdom of God has been called 'the already but not yet.' The German Jesuit priest Alfred Delp, who was executed by the Nazis early in 1945 for his resistance to Hitler, wrote this:

“Advent is the time of promise; it is not yet the time of fulfilment. We are still in the midst of everything and in the logical inexorability and relentlessness of destiny....Space is still filled with the noise of destruction and annihilation, the shouts of self-assurance and arrogance, the weeping of despair and helplessness. But round about the horizon the eternal realities stand silent in their age-old longing. There shines on them already the first mild light of the radiant fulfilment to come. From afar sound the first notes as of pipes and voices, not yet discernible as a song or melody. It is all far off still, and only just announced and foretold. But it is happening, today.”

This time for which we are waiting, which has begun and yet which already is, is a tremendous pouring of the light into darkness, a bursting through of the divine into the human, when the Creator becomes his creation and heaven is indivisibly wedded to earth. It is the greatest reconciliation of the most extreme contraries – and it begins in the heart of a little baby. Only music and poetry and art and symbol and myth and everything that makes us truly human – in other words, only *love* – can truly catch a glimpse of it.