

Advent and Christmas Lectionary Meditations

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These lectionary meditations are slightly edited versions of the texts written for, and published by, *The Christian Century* magazine for each of the six Sundays between 1st Sunday of Advent (2 December 2007) and Epiphany (6 January 2008). Following the normal practice of *The Christian Century* the readings which underpin these meditations are those of the Revised Common Lectionary rather than the Catholic lectionary.

Second Sunday of Advent

December 9, 2007

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

A jostling fulfilment

How is the Presence working on us? Once again the liturgy gives us three different prods into life. And as the sound of portentous thunder diminishes, without disappearing yet, so we start to find ourselves being trained towards perceiving a somewhat different shape to the One who comes than our fantasies and our fears had constructed for us.

A hypnotist summons a temporary new conscious self into being, by getting us to concentrate on something outside ourselves while, below the level of that of which we are conscious, the set of relationships which cause us to think and perceive as we do are worked on. In liturgy, the jostling together of the different voices from Scripture while we are summoned into concentrating on One who is coming, enables us to continue our journey of re-birth. Our new self is quickened into existence as the Spirit awakens in us someone who we didn't know we were, but who turns out to be more ourselves than we thought we knew.

So the jostling and the puncturing continue apace. With the reading from Isaiah, we are beginning to be let gently down from the portentousness of the vision of the Judge from Zion. The vision is being refocused within us. For now it is becoming clearer that the One who is to come will be human, and with a history, which means, that the One will be part of a certain fulfilment. A story which started with Jesse will be brought to fulfilment. That was a tricky story, since of all Jesse's children, it was the most improbable one, the youngest, the pretty-boy

with the beautiful eyes, who was to be anointed. Any story fulfilling the story of Jesse is likely to be as improbable as it is linear.

Isaiah then gives us two visions, not yet joined together, for the prophecy is still out of focus. In the first part we learn what the new anointed one will be like, what gifts he will have and how he will be someone run by Elsewhere. Elsewhere will make sure that he is not run by the criteria of group think, of lobbying groups; that his criteria will give voice to the meek who have no voice, and don't know how to use it. The words he speak will become the criteria for everything, to the dismay of the wicked. And yet, even at this stage of Isaiah's imagination, there is something harsh about the One who is to come: striking the earth and killing the wicked.

So how is that to be reconciled with the ushering in of Peace? For it is getting into even clearer focus here that that is what is promised: the One who is to come longs for peace and seeks to make it possible. The extravagance of the peace that is to come is illustrated by the wolf lying down with the lamb, the Lion eating straw like an Ox, which was what happened to Nebuchadnezzar following Daniel's prophecy (Dan 4, 25.33) so that he could learn the sovereignty of YHWH. The One who is to come longs for us to live in peace, yet how will that peacefulness be inaugurated? Surely that One will stand as a sign, one of whom questions are asked, and the Presence of God will envelop him. But will his face be as hard as flint? What sort of sign will he be? If he is to be a vanguard of vengeance, how will he make peace? For vengeance multiplied only leads to more vengeance, never to peace.

The Pauline passage works on us another way: reminding us that really the One who came was the truth of God, and did fulfil the prophecies to the Patriarchs, and did open up the truth of all things beyond the confines of Israel. Our access to this truth, the sign that the One who is to come *has* come, is shown in our living out the first fruits of that: dwelling in harmony with one another. It is this beginning to be empowered to live in peace which is the first fruits of the Coming. From living in that peace comes a joyful hope in what is to come in the future, a sense of things opening out, of the promise of things being verified. The givenness of peace, and the givenness of our access to truth, come together.

Let us not fool ourselves as to how easy it was to perceive this. The gentleness of the One who is to come is being hinted at, but we still have John the Baptist, the last of the prophets, pointing to the fulfilment of his own work. And yet he too is out of focus. He knows that only a change of heart and mind will enable people to begin to perceive the shape of the One who is to come, for with our current

mindsets we cannot imagine the shape of the Presence. He also knows that between his preparation of people, and the shape of the Presence to come there is an incommensurable distance. Yet even he who was of priestly family can scarcely understand that his rite of public penance and purification would also be the rite of ordination of the Great High Priest who was to come, and thereafter of all of us who are to have our access to the Holy of Holies laid open by his Sacrifice.

Why his hostility to the many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism? He knows how dangerous apparent goodness is, that is all our grasped goodness, and the sense of entitlement which comes with it. He was aware of how dangerous to such goodness was the One who is to come, but like Isaiah he seems unable to grasp that the One who is coming will turn out indeed to be the bearer of all that dangerousness, only because of the fear and resentment of those in whose midst he will be. Not because there is any violence or vengeance in himself.

We have not yet undergone the extraordinary shift in perception and imagination which comes upon us when we understand that in the One who comes, there is no violence at all, no vengeance, no desire for retribution, only a longing for us to be fully alive. And that all our fears, our desires for revenge, our stumbling blocks, which we so easily project onto God, are ours, ours alone, and able to be undone, let go, forgiven, by the One who is coming in.