

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.

Third Sunday of Advent

December 16, 2007

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-10; Luke 1:47-55; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

A stretching fulfilment

With each Sunday of Advent, it is as though the Spirit brings us deeper into the Presence by bringing us closer to having our feet on the ground, closer to the present, and closer to our hearts. The Divine heart surgeon carries on reconfiguring our desires so that we can inhabit both the Presence and the present. For how else can we be made alive?

And this means learning how to be stretched, how to long, how to hope, how to be vulnerable to failure. This is the route without undergoing which there is no Coming. For if we cannot be taken to the end of ourselves, stretched beyond our capacity to imagine a salvation, have our longing forged against the hard anvil of apparent impossibility, then we are still wanting something that is a continuation of our selves, and not the Other who is Coming in.

There is scarcely a more poignant communication in the New Testament than John's message from prison: "Art Thou the One who is to come, or wait we for another?" Here is a heart stretched towards a fulfilment that is not of his making, and in the face of which he is vulnerable to a sense of shame, loss and futility. Given what he is undergoing, how can he be sure that he was even pointing in the direction of God's breaking in? Will this One vindicate him against the enemy who holds him in a dungeon? Even he runs the risk of being scandalized by Jesus.

The presence of the One who is coming in had been vastly easier to talk about when its time was not yet at hand. And yet now, as it comes in, the presence is very unlike how John, as all the prophets before him, had imagined him. The Presence becomes much more difficult to identify as it draws closer to us in time and place. Shouldn't the criteria be clearer? Shouldn't it be more obvious that the One who comes in will recompense his faithful ones and wreak vengeance on evil doers?

Our Lord replies in two ways. First he replies to John. He knows it would be unfair to give John a personal guarantee – to say “I really am who you thought – trust me” for that would merely leave John agonizing over his own ability to trust another human. So Jesus points towards something objective, something that is manifest: the signs of the One coming in – the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking and so on. The whole Isaiah package. The God who hides himself – El Mishtater – does not point to himself, but allows his works to be rejoiced in (Is 45, 15). The signs being given are those of the Creator breaking in to fulfil his creation, which is what the promised redemption was all about. John's heart, stretched beyond parchedness can rest on this knowledge – can be satisfied, for to the heart attuned to the One who is no part of the order of existing things, a prophet's heart, a sign of the creative work of God being made manifest is already the greatest refreshment that can be given. It allows the heart to rest on the giver.

And Our Lord even recognises for John that at the very end of being stretched towards the Other who is coming in, there does lie the risk of scandal. There lies the risk that we will interpret the One according to our own pattern of desire, make of him a resolution of our partisan needs, and so be scandalized into not recognising the real One who comes. If however we are not scandalised, we are set free, we no longer need fear the social other which surrounds us, because we are confident of being held in the regard of that power which is coming in, and which is more solid than any form of group bonding, cultural togetherness or inter-personal prestige.

Here, at the very edge of the stretched fulfilment, it is as if Jesus knows that by asking people to let go of the very notion of vengeance, of divine retribution, he leaves them with two options – to trust in the goodness of the One coming in, or to be locked in scandal at the collapse of partisan goodness and the constant need to build it up again. This latter possibility is indeed the arrival of a new sort of wrath, but rather than being divine wrath, it is a purely human wrath, one no less powerful for that. A human wrath that is a being enclosed into a scandalised imagination in the face of a goodness far too gentle for it to behold.

Our Lord then turns to those he was teaching, and comments on John: when the crowds went out to the desert to be baptised, was it just a celebrity show, a collective display of mourning? This week we have an ascetic celebrity. Next week we will have a Hollywood starlet? Yet the crowd fascination is just the same. Was this all there was to John? No indeed! He was indeed part of the solidity of God's self manifestation, nothing futile about him. The crowd was right to pick up that there was something of God here. Just as John was stretched, even in his imprisonment, so he had been sent to stretch hearts and imaginations towards the fulfilment so that others might find themselves closer to being able to receive the One coming in.

Yet, and here Jesus is adamant. There is a difference not only in degree, but in kind, between the imagination of John, stretched as it was, concerning the things of God, and the imagination of those who are to find themselves ushered into the Presence, one where human violence has been taken inside himself by the one undergoing the sacrifice, and where there is no violence coming out at all.

James illustrates this new stretching of the heart inside the sign of the kingdom: be patient, strengthen your hearts, do not grumble. It is easier now for us than for the stretched prophets, for, if only we would remember it, we have seen what John did not live to see: the full purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. Not as add-on qualities but as the full purpose of the Lord. The One coming in wants to show us that there is no violence in him at all.

Did I say that makes it easier? What is it like to be stretched out in a wrathful world in expectation of the arrival of an incommensurable power who is not wrathful at all?