

Advent and Christmas Lectionary Meditations

James Alison

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.

First Sunday after Christmas

December 30, 2007

Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

Fulfilment as history

All that pruning of our imagination, all that background work on our expectation which has been the labour of the Spirit during Advent came to fruition on Christmas Day. We were brought into the Presence. The Virgin who for nine months had been weaving the veil of the Temple out of the material of her own body sat in stupefied and exhausted silence. We too, following the line of her gaze towards the manger “veiled in flesh, the Godhead see”. The Angels sing the first Gloria, for where there is Presence, there too is Praise. The two are inseparable. We too, allow our ears to be drawn, and then our voices, and then our hearts to follow, into that proclamation of the new mode of presence among us of the Creator. We are going to be inducted into lifelong Praise.

For it is the Creator about whom we are talking: “not a messenger or an angel but his Presence” as the reading from Isaiah tells us. Not one who approaches us with anger, or even with fear or suspicion “surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely”. The Presence who manifests as vulnerable to us, trusting us against all the evidence. With a belief in us which we do not easily share. What we call “the incarnation” might also be described as the way in which The Presence has come among us, entrusting himself to us so that we dare to make of our history something which shares God’s life.

Psalm 148 is a praise of Creation. It follows the movement of Creation found in Genesis and in the Temple. For Temple worshippers God dwelt “outside”

creation in the Holy of Holies, and the movement of Creation began from the veil which symbolized the beginning of material existence and flowed outwards towards symbols of the “days” of Creation. The Psalm starts with the praises of the Lord alone, outside all created matter, before anything was. And then little by little, each element of Creation joins in: the heavens and the heights, the angels and the hosts. These were the non-material parts of creation, prior to the first day, when matter began to appear. Thereafter it is the created matter of each “day” which comes bursting into existence shouting its praise, until finally after the animals, it is the turn of the humans, kings and commoners. Amongst these, last of all is the horn raised up for God’s people, and he is become the Praise, and the Presence, and the Name. It is the birth of this Horn that we are celebrating.

For us, it is difficult to cross the gap between “creation”, understood as something which happened “at the beginning”, and “history” understood as the sort of things which humans do thereafter. One is to do with facts, we think, and the other is to do with interpretation. No wonder we find it difficult to celebrate the Incarnation! For the incarnation is predicated on an understanding of Creation permanently contemporary, always pulsating just beneath all matter, and delating the presence of the Creator to those with open eyes. Incarnation is the Creator beginning to fulfil all the possibilities of history, which we live in a way which constantly grinds down in disappointment. This he does by opening up the possibility that what we humans make of the flux of matter can be turned into something which delights in and is a praise of God.

In Matthew’s infancy narrative, no sooner has the Presence come into the world than it begins to collect to itself all the possibilities of God’s making of history a thing of praise. Immediately the Presence is embarked upon collecting to itself the journey of the people of Israel to Egypt. Immediately the banal local monarch, Herod, is the portentous Pharaoh of lore, killing all the first born of the Hebrew children, and Jesus is reliving the story of Moses’ childhood, protected by providence in order to lead his people to an even greater promise. This is a sense of “history” which is far distant from our sympathies, since here history is the Creator making Narrative a bearer of abundance. In order for us to grasp this we are shown how events of the present repeat structures from the past, either falling away from what they offered, or, as in Matthew, building on them towards something new and not yet told. Imagine a succession of interlinked volcanoes viewed as similarly shaped yet chronologically different symptoms of but one eruption that is both always underway and yet to be achieved.

For those attentive to the One who has come in, what is beginning to be revealed to us is the extraordinary mixture of the strength of the protagonist and the

weakness of the Presence. Contrast the serenity with which the Epistle to the Hebrews describes the way that the Creator enters into History as a Priest. For that is the least inappropriate analogy by which we tell the story of the One who made of our history something which shares in the life of God. Jesus' historical living out and his manner of going to death achieved in fact what the ancient sacrifice of atonement had always been prefiguring.

And that historical living out was, from before birth, a living forth into a narrative which was beset by danger, by risk. No less so after his birth, when flight, conspiracy, treachery and violent rage were the constant background to the One who was coming into the world.

While we are wrapped in praise this Christmas tide, we might perhaps ponder on the contrast between this sense of perpetual danger, and the extraordinary innocence and confidence of God speaking in Isaiah "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely". What manner of heart is it who looks at our Herod-like history and sees in it, and offers us the possibility of making of it, a journey to a promise?