

29 November 2020 – Advent 1

Isaiah 64:1-9 · 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 · Mark 13:24-37

Sr Gregory

Our religious practice has a pretty tenuous relationship with historical time. Of course we know that centuries separate the Exodus and the Resurrection, but in liturgical time, they happen on the same day. Likewise manna in the wilderness and the Eucharist, the Suffering Servant and the Passion of Christ: time folds in on itself, and distant things are drawn together into the same moment. And so it is in Advent, when we focus both on the Incarnation, at a particular point 2020 years ago, and on the Last Things: death, judgment, heaven, hell; the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the universe, at some indeterminate point in a metaphysical future. But this isn't quite like hearing the Exodus story at Easter. Advent doesn't just collapse stories from the past together into the present—Advent pulls our **future** into the present. It skips lightly over all the centuries since Jesus' birth and all the time we have left until the Last Judgment. At least to me, it makes those Last Things feel uncomfortably close.

Advent is about an immense and irrevocable paradigm shift, a sea change in the way things are. The coming of the Savior, the arrival of the Bridegroom, the return of the Master to the household to set things right. But we know that “right” doesn't mean “the way things were before”, because things have never really been right since the Garden of Eden. “Right” means something new, something we long for in our bones and yet something so alien to us that we'll never figure it out for ourselves. We can only know it by revelation; that is to say, by apocalypse.

There's a reason “apocalypse” has come to mean both “revelation” and “the end of all things”, beyond its association with John's visions. A revelation is a truth that changes a person, or indeed changes a whole group or a society, irreversibly. Someone realizing that they're gay or trans is often a revelation. You can't go back from knowing that about yourself. Black Lives Matter has been a revelation for American society. So has the Trump presidency. Climate change is a revelation for the whole world. The mountains quake, and the sun goes out, and the powers in the heavens are shaken. Things that seemed solid fall apart; things that were hidden are made known; God comes to us in ways we have never seen before. And what do we do? Well, following God is about embracing a future that's truer and more honest than the past. Whether the revealed truth in front of us is something dark and difficult or something joyful and lovely, we know that the **fullness** of truth—the real end of all things that we're journeying towards—is bright and good, because that is God's promise to us in Jesus.

So what do we do when the mountains quake and the sky falls? If we want to evacuate to somewhere that seems safer or just hide under the duvet, which is a perfectly reasonable response, Paul reassures us: Christ “will also strengthen you to the end”.<sup>1</sup> We turn our faces toward the future and go out to meet God, as Paul says elsewhere, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead”.<sup>2</sup>

One of my favorite Advent texts is the Matin Responsory that’s often sung at Anglican carol services, taken from the Roman Catholic Office of Readings for today:

I look from afar: and lo, I see the power of God coming, and a cloud covering  
the whole earth.

Go ye out to meet him and say: Tell us, art thou he that should come to reign  
over thy people Israel?

High and low, rich and poor, one with another,  
Go ye out to meet him and say:

Hear, O thou Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a sheep,  
Tell us, art thou he that should come?

Stir up thy strength, O Lord, and come  
to reign over thy people Israel.

“I look from afar”. The doorkeeper in Jesus’ story today is content to watch in stillness and unknowing for as long as it takes—it could be five minutes or fifty years—and either way, they’re ready to turn on a dime **whenever** the time comes. It’s a kind of stability that’s patient, and also light and forward-looking. Michael Casey says of stability, “the best example of this is a surfer. He knows that to get up and stay up on his surfboard he needs to be aware of the movement of wind and water so that he can subtly adjust his centre of gravity. The best way to persevere is to keep growing...the important thing is to keep moving forward, to keep adapting to changed circumstances, and to re-orient oneself towards the goal.”<sup>3</sup> Or again, perhaps stability is like being a lookout on a ship at sea, shifting and swaying as it rolls under us so we can keep our eyes steady and fixed on the horizon in the east.

There is an element of Christian spirituality that’s always waiting for something, although we are good at getting on with things in the meantime. I have always found it

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1 1 Corinthians 1:8

2 Philippians 3:13

3 Michael Casey, *Strangers to the City*, 191

easy to pray in in-between places, bus stops and train stations and airports. Some writers, including Casey again,<sup>4</sup> talk about religious as being **suspended** between earth and heaven, by poverty and chastity and prayer; not so much adrift or otherworldly, but light and alert, and detached from everything except the One they're waiting for.

So how is this keeping awake, this constant spiritual watchfulness, not just jumpiness and anxiety? We have to be careful not to take Jesus' words the wrong way: "keep awake *or else*, because God is always watching and things could collapse at any moment!" No, I know from experience, as do many of us, that anxiety is *not* a path to holiness. Anxiety is closed and defensive; it anticipates revelations with an attitude of fear. The watchfulness that Jesus calls us into is quite the opposite. It's patient and curious—even childlike. It's open to the unknown; it gets excited about what might happen next.

God is always doing something we've never seen before. Even in a life like ours, where the days and weeks and years run in a repeating pattern, things are always changing for good: I mean both "changing permanently" and "changing for the better". Jesus calls us to be attentive to change around us and change within us; to be open to the future, and open to new revelations about the past and the present. As we well know, we need to be ready to lose our pride and our attachments. We also need to be ready to lose our anxieties and our fears.

We always have mixed motives and impure hearts; we are terrified of how much this will cost us and how much will change and pass away and never be the same, and yet still we cry out from the depth of our being:

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—  
as when fire kindles brushwood  
and the fire causes water to boil—"<sup>5</sup>

As much as it frightens and even grieves us, we want the world as we know it to end, because that's what the advent of God is. The Incarnation itself may not have been heralded by quaking mountains and falling skies, but it did destroy the entire existential and moral order of the universe, and restored it incomprehensibly greater and more merciful.

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4 Michael Casey, *Strangers to the City*, 65

5 Isaiah 64:1-2a

Just as Christ is still born in us every day, so the Apocalypse is already happening in us and around us. The stars fall—the old order passes away—Christ breaks into our lives in power and glory. The past and the future both echo into the present: God who was, still is; God who is to come, already is. There are many lessons for us in the Incarnation and the Last Things; and one of them is that things can always change for good. Sometimes suddenly and all at once; sometimes so gradually we only notice when we look back over years. Sometimes through our own long and diligent work, and sometimes out of the blue, unasked for and unearned. However it happens, Christ will come. Already, not yet, 2000 years ago, at the end of time, right now—and at this time of year, most of all, Christ is coming **soon**. Go ye out to meet him.