

The Virtues and Disciplines of Advent

Sermon for Advent 4B, 20 December 2020

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16; Magnificat; Romans 16: 25-27; Luke 1: 26-38

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

The virtues and disciplines of Advent are hardly popular ones: waiting, humility, patience, obedience. These virtues and disciplines are all about making space for God's creative action rather than presuming that all creative action must begin with ourselves alone. But for so many such ideas are too countercultural, too counterintuitive, too inconceivable. Can you imagine typical men willing to demonstrate the humility and self-effacement that we've seen from John the Baptist, gladly announcing that the coming one will be greater than he is, whose sandal thong he's not worthy to untie? And likewise, for women with Mary: thanks to feminism resistance has grown towards the portrayal of Mary

in today's Gospel of the Annunciation. Women are disturbed by apparent gender stereotyping as Mary patiently, humbly and obediently submits to God's will without a murmur.

Friends, these imaginative challenges of Advent are prefigured for us in our 2 Samuel reading today. King David is full of noble intentions, ready to build a house for Israel's God, and Nathan his prophet shares this high-mindedness. But in an upset for normal human religious zeal and busyness, God declares that he'll be acting on David's behalf, not vice versa—that grace precedes works, to put it in a later idiom. In the lavish generosity of God, beyond all our expectations, David learns that he'll be given a house, and a dynasty. And this promise is echoed in today's Gospel as Jesus is declared the inheritor of David's house through Joseph, Mary's betrothed. The message here is that Christianity centres on God's actions, and only derivatively on ours. Hence Christianity's spiritual teachers conclude that the active impulse in religion readily goes astray without the contemplative impulse to guide and correct it.

But wait a minute. Advent isn't about spiritual do-nothingism. It's just that we need to be in the right space, in the right frame of mind, so that really effective action becomes possible. The virtues and disciplines of Advent are like those of the trained martial artist, whose carefully cultivated still centre is the place from which they can most effectively strike.

And this is what we see with Mary, whose patient submission to God's will in the Annunciation story leads only verses later to one of the great revolutionary songs. Her Magnificat erupts as a divine challenge to all the world's entrenched injustice, violence and cruelty. The mighty are to be put down from their seats while the humble and meek are lifted up. The rich will go without while the hungry are filled with good things. God's dream of justice for suffering humanity announces itself most forcefully from the still centre of Israel's patient prayerful hope, which is embodied by Mary. It's these virtues and disciplines of Advent that will most reliably issue in liberation for humanity, as holy people make space in their lives for God to act in history.

Now, let me try to bring this down to earth with a comparison, looking to how this Advent season is currently playing out in America.

A couple of weeks back I compared what we do here in the Eucharist with a Trump rally. Here we open ourselves to God and the transformation that Jesus is working in our lives.

Whereas at a Trump rally people are confirmed in a fixed posture of angry grievance. They're given permission to be contemptuous and vengeful. They renounce empathy and declare their superiority over the hated so-called elites. A Trump rally is really a kind of anti-Eucharist.

Well, in these present days, with Trump still bullying Republican leaders into submission, and with his unflagging attempts to bamboozle, dominate and manipulate the American people, we're witnessing what amounts to an anti-Advent. We see no humility, no patience, no obedience to America's guiding principles from Trump, but instead an utterly shameless attempt at bending reality to his control.

Trump's stunt with a Bible outside St John's Episcopal Church in Lafayette Square represented the opposite of how we should approach God's word. Instead of reading the Bible and humbly praying for growth in wisdom and discernment, as every genuinely Christian leader must surely do, Trump weaponised the Bible—he profaned it and silenced it. And so instead of Advent's joyful blessing, looking to the Christ child, America's anti-Advent brings a sullen curse in which nothing is ever meant to change, looking to the toddler-in-chief.

So, friends, with John the Baptist, that great but humble prophet, and with Mary that prayer-fuelled revolutionary virgin, we're invited to cultivate the Advent virtues and disciplines. Because if we're schooled in that patient, pregnant anticipation, then we stand the best chance of being ready and able whenever it might be that God calls us to action. Otherwise, without a Church and Christians to set forth a different reality, the world risks being left with more of that all-too-familiar anti-Advent message, where the mighty stay smugly on their thrones, while the humble and meek are fleeced and treated like fools.

And “now to God who is able to strengthen you according to the gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed ... to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever. AMEN.” (from Rom 16: 25-27)