

Prepare for the Beginning: Stay Awake.

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Isaiah 64.1-9, Psalm 80.1-7,17-19, 1 Corinthians 1.1-9, Mark 13.24-37

The new church year has begun. We are now in Advent. We have embarked on the build up to the mystery of Christmas, which leads us into Epiphany, Lent and Easter. Yet where is the real beginning? Are we celebrating a beginning that has already occurred or are we awaiting another beginning — the second coming of Christ, or the resurrection or the coming of the Holy Spirit. Christmas is not just about Jesus' birth. I remember when I first came across this notion that it wasn't all about nativity scenes and presents — quite a revolutionary idea. But, Jesus' birth is a bit of a side issue when you think about it, given that only two of the four gospels speak of it and it is hardly mentioned at all in the rest of the New Testament. The Christmas stories tell us some interesting things about Jesus but what they are really about is what they are leading up to — the cross where Jesus sacrifice redeems those held captive by sin and the resurrection of Jesus that makes possible, new life, new creation, the new creation that will finally reach its fulfilment when Jesus comes the second time around. Christmas then is a mystery about beginnings and endings, history and prophecy, heaven and earth. It is the time when the light shines in the darkness and the darkness is overcome. When you think about it tinsel and plastic Santas come nowhere close in being able to reveal this mystery.

Modern science gives us a much better analogy. You will have to take my word for this or at least go and do some reading but time and space are very different to how we understand them or perceive them. The theory of relativity, quantum mechanics and other theories all point to time being neither linear nor absolute. There is no past or future, only an eternal present. Time is simply one dimension of the space-time continuum. Not only that but all matter is energy and waves; our experience is determined by the way space contracts; and our role as observers is critical to the way reality appears.

However, we are unable to visualise this matter-space-time continuum, or deal with it in practical terms, because our consciousness is bound to the human body, which is in turn bound to a single reference frame. We live within the confines of our own little space-time cubicle.

Still you can try and imagine what it might be like. Next time you stir a cup of tea adding a spoon of sugar or some sweetener; try to comprehend that the swirling motion of the tea is due to the expansion of the universe and the stretching of the space. As you sit in the garden sipping the cup and see the leaves falling lazily in the breeze, all that is happenings around you, all the motion and movement are caused by the expanding space in the universe. So is the action of your lips, your breath, your heartbeats, and your vision. As you sit there imagine to that whatever you do not see or hear or perceive is potentially on the other side of the universe including your cup of tea.

Weird hey?! I don't really want to preach about the new physics. What I am trying to show is that when we think about Advent and Christmas and the second coming of Christ we need to open up our minds and imagine possibilities we have not dreamt of or can imagine. We need to free our minds. (Neo) Using the new science as a bit of a help, we can imagine that Christmas is not just about babies in mangers 2000 years ago. It is about Jesus Christ coming to us in all times and places, right here and right now. In this sense the second coming is already happening and will continue to happen, in this corner of the universe and in the Cartwheel galaxy. It is true, there is a galaxy called that. The new creation is already here, as St Paul never tired of telling us. This mystery of Christ is far beyond what we can easily comprehend with our limited space-time body.

The question then is if we are, as I have said on a journey to a mystery, the mystery of the incarnation and the second coming, to the mystery of new creation, how will you spend this Advent time? If we are preparing for new possibilities and waiting for the new to arise, what steps do we need to take to help us be able to accept God's new gift?

Our readings today point to the importance of waiting and how we wait. The reading from Isaiah with its great cry that God would tear open the heavens and come down is embedded with the confession that humans are utterly dependent on God, that they need him, despite the fact they forget him at every turn. Corinthians speaks of being faithful and confident as we await Christ's coming. The Gospel says that no human knows the hour or the day when Christ will come and so we need to be awake and ready, alert and watching.

All the Greek words that Mark uses for this type of waiting are present imperatives which means continual action — that is we do not stop being ready, alert and watching. It is a continuous state of being.

This is a hard call I think. How do we stay ready and alert? Surely a nap, a bit of gratuitous TV watching, a bit of putting our heads in the sand is not such a bad thing. If the universe is as weird and mysterious as modern science suggests it is, surely we can all just rest our weary human minds. Jesus of course knew how very human we are which is why his parables are full of bridesmaids and servants not being ready. Because they were unable to pay attention they missed the main game. They missed the fact that the triune God is here, present in our reality, always coming to us, always with us. Instead of diversion and forgetfulness Jesus calls us to humble attentiveness.

This is an attentiveness that knows its need of God and God's goodness and waits faithfully, patiently with Spirit and Body awake and taking notice. If it is true that Jesus Christ is coming to us in all times and places, right here and right now, then surely we need to be attentive to the signs around us. We need to be attentive to what is happening inside of us. If God is reaching out to us ready to guide and bless then we need to be taking steps to notice where he leads. If Christ has come, is coming and will come, then we need to know that reality with our minds and hearts.

Many people I think are unconsciousness. By that I mean most people are not aware of themselves, their motivations, their addictions, their loves and their hates. Many people avoid feeling, knowing and being challenged. Deep down most of us are defensive, scared and unsure. Most of us, even the religious ones, doubt God and turn away. We cover up these unknown and unacknowledged aspects of ourselves with diversions, entertainment, intellectual debates or just plain drugs. We are not awake. We are asleep. Thomas Merton, that great contemplative master, said that the question is not the coming of Christ but my response — am I ready? Are we awake enough to be able to discern his presence? Are we in touch enough to know Christ when he appears?

I would like to say that I have some easy answers to these questions. All I can really say is that I struggle with being humbly attentive as much as the next person. In this world of endless diversion, consumer choice, a new computer game and another Hollywood movie every month, of the internet and cheap travel, I suspect it has never been harder to be humbly attentive, to be awake and waiting on the Lord. I also suspect it has never been more important. There are forces of darkness in the world that will lead us away from our true purpose. Violence, oppression, revenge, greed and hatred spread their tentacles into our lives — we just have to listen to the latest news to be reminded of that yet again. Being humbly attentive to God and God's vision of love, peace and justice is not an optional extra, it is vital.

If we listen to the great spiritual teachers it is also simple. Thomas Merton speaks simply of slowing down, of surrendering our control, of touching the world with reverence and respect. He speaks of fostering a consciousness that is more alert to God's presence in the world by 'choosing to make all activity bear fruit'. Ignatius of Loyola counseled people to examine their actions twice daily to help them refine their awareness of how they were living in relationship to God. These and other spiritual masters know that the love and purposes of God must be discerned, welcomed and embraced. Christ may have come, is coming and will come but for that to have force and power in our lives we need to know that with attentive minds and hearts.

As I have been writing these reflections on Advent and the ever-present coming of our Lord, I have of course been reflecting on Linda and her long ministry in the Church of God. I could say a whole lot of things about her various ministries over the last 20 years, her work with refugees, Women in Black, the gay and lesbian community, the ANU, her faithful tending of St Philip's web site, her preaching and leading in this church and in others but what I really want to talk about is the way how everything she does is informed by her conviction that God cannot be contained in any one place or time. In a way Linda lives outside the box. Somehow Linda understands that God in Christ comes to us from outside the boxes of doctrine and practice that we construct and in which we live. Linda is a true deacon in that she goes to meet God beyond our walls and constructs. She goes to meet God in those places in the world and in her heart. We get glimpses of this with Linda when she says things we don't quite understand, when she delightedly talks about lizards and magpies, when she looks up while we are all looking down and when she refuses to be categorized in any way and she refuses to let anyone else be categorized as well. Listening and being with Linda can be a little disconcerting but only because you are faced with your own God given freedom and freedom is never simple or easy. Being that sort of deacon in and for the church is also not straightforward. One cannot look at Linda's work and find a clear-cut ministry with boundaries. Instead what you find is a person who is her calling with how she lives and interprets reality, how she inhabits our boxes with us and how she points to God's loving creation and God's presence with us.

My prayer for all of us this Advent is to wake up and stay awake, to be ready and waiting, to be open to possibilities and God's presence and call and blessing. My hope is that we can commit ourselves on a daily basis to humble attentiveness. Let us pray:

Come Lord, come down, come in, come among us. Help us to pay attention to your presence in our lives. Help us to stay awake and focused so we may usher in your love and peace. Stir up within us the spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Tear open the heavens and come down. Come Lord, come down, come in, come among us. Amen.