

`Hark to the Advent Voice`

Sermon by the Rev. Margaret Kirk
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Advent is nothing if it is not a deep yearning for something that will bring transformation. Light in darkness is the most potent image at this time of the year. Many churches will conduct services of light - a thanksgiving for the light, epitomised for Christians as the Christ child - redeemer, saviour of humankind.

Whatever we feel about Christian mythology each of us can honour the spirit of Advent. If we dismiss it, disregard it, we do an injustice to our deep instinctive need for love and justice to be made manifest - for light to shine in dark places. Above all, Advent is a time of hope for better things to come.

As we move towards the end of this year, I am aware as I know you are, of so many days that have been overshadowed by information that greets us in the morning as we turn on our radios and watch our television screens: the hideous slaughter of people in Mumbai, the appalling tragedy of lives lost and scarred in the Congo - a place that never seems to experience peace for any length of time, casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, the immense suffering of people in Zimbabwe. These are the things we know about. In many parts of the world there will be many acts of cruelty that we know nothing of.

I cannot begin to imagine what it must be like living in a city where death and severe injury happens routinely. I cannot imagine how families continue to live their lives. I cannot imagine how doctors and nurses deal daily with such atrocity - with human pain and anguish on the scale that we continue to see.

So for many of us as the year draws to a close, there is a deep yearning for something better - for some resolution, for some sense of humanity to be restored in these deeply troubled places.

Of course, we have this feeling all the time so what is different about Advent?

Advent is a tradition of waiting - waiting in a state of hopefulness. Even, paradoxically, being both hopeless and hopeful.

T.S. Eliot puts it most beautifully in The Four Quartets:

`I said to my soul be still, and wait without hope

For hope would be hope for the wrong thing;

Wait without love.

For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith.

But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought;

So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.`

The tradition of advent gives us permission to voice the yearning or at least to recognise it. Rather than it be just a nagging anxiety that afflicts our consciousness, it becomes an articulated yearning for something better. And the articulation, strangely is not in the words - the words escape us - the articulation is in the ritual of finding space to wait in darkness.

`So the darkness shall be the light and the stillness the dancing.`

And not even to think unless we can make thinking into what a Hebrew translation of the word makes it, which is: `to say in one`s heart.`

`To think`, in Hebrew, means `to say in one`s heart.` So we might allow Advent to be a time of waiting when we say in our heart what we most yearn for.

When we find space for Advent we become linked to all the hundreds and thousands of human beings who have used this time, used the Christian myth of Jesus` birth to wish for love and compassion to enter in. `O come, O come Emmanuel` - a plea from the heart. In our yearning we are at one with all those who have gone before us in their yearning. This time of darkness may lead each one of us towards inner transformation and so it seems to me that we must honour Advent.

We Unitarians don`t treat the story of Jesus` birth as literal fact. We treat it respectfully and wondrously as myth. I`m using the word myth in a particular way. I`m not using it in its popular sense as meaning a fiction or, a falsehood but in its less popular sense as a story about the past that embodies and expresses a traditional culture and contains symbolic power for the present..

Most Unitarians recognise the story of Jesus` birth as a myth of rich symbolic significance. At Christmas we listen to the story. The more imperfect, the more broken, the more profoundly dis-eased and disturbed our society feels to be to us, the deeper our need to hear the story.

Ben Okri, the great African story teller tells us:

`Stories do not belong to eternity. They belong to time. And out of time they grow. And it is through lives that we touch the bedrock of suffering, and the fire of the soul; it is through lives, and in time, that stories - re-lived and re-dreamed - become timeless.`

`Stories can heal profound sicknesses of the spirit.....the greatest religions convert the world through stories. It is the stories, rather than the facts which still enchant us towards belief.`

The story of Jesus` birth is one such timeless story, touching us deeply, bringing the recognition of our need for the Christ child to enter in and awaken us to new possibilities - inner transformation and the transformation of the world in which we live.

This is what all people have longed for when they sing those words `o come, o come

Emmanuel` .

Just as we long to see our world transformed; to hear that Sunni and Shia Muslims can live together peacefully, that Palestinians and Israelis will discover a way to be reconciled to each other, that some of the ills of our own society, here in our midst: racial grievances, depression and poverty can be better and more compassionately understood, so the Hebrew prophets longed for a society where the darkness of exile and grief and loneliness would be dispelled.

So we have this story: the coming of light in darkness in the form of a child who would transform their world.

The words of Isaiah speak to us as richly as they did to people from a vastly different culture thousands of years ago:

Chapter 9: verse 2

` The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death upon them hath the light shined

And verse 6:

` For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called wonderful counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting father, prince of peace.`

Some words and concepts are difficult but mostly metaphors and symbols allow a freedom of interpretation. We all know what it is to need light in darkness and the symbolism of the Christ child born to bring light and peace and justice is profound and powerful.

The psychologist Carl Jung believed that modern men and women are starved of symbols. He believed that the Christ is an archetype of human potentiality (archetype simply means something imprinted in the mind from the beginning which makes its presence felt in powerful images. Archetypes appear in common images in the myths of all cultures).

The God or Christ image is an archetype: a symbol that had absorbed the cultural yearnings of the Hebrews, the Romans and the Greeks. By the time it was part of the consciousness of 1st century Palestine, it had attached itself to the radical Jewish reformer, Jesus of Nazareth. One writer, describing Jung`s understanding of this says:

` Jesus lived a personal, concrete, historical life. However, it was the archetype of a Redeemer slumbering, so to speak, in the collective unconscious, which became attached to that life.. This powerful collective image made itself visible in the man Jesus. Jesus took on those projections.....`

David Doel, a retired British minister and psychotherapist, says in his book ` The Lost Child and the Christ Child` :

` Some theological systems assume Jesus was the Christ and that this union was a once only event, making Jesus uniquely the Child of God.. But other theologians believe that the assimilation of the Christ in Jesus, reveals a possibility ever present in all human beings` He

says: ` Jung taught the Christ was a symbol of the Self, the Core of our Being.`

We need to differentiate between the real human person of Jesus and what we have projected onto him - the archetypal Redeemer figure.

When we sing our Advent hymns, when we sing *O come o come Emmanuel*, we re-engage with poetry and symbol and mythology. Our yearning for light in darkness is every bit as earnestly desired; is every bit as meaningful and authentic as it is for those who believe that Jesus is the Redeemer. We also approach Advent waiting for transformation, with a prayer in our heart and with that sense of mystery and wonder about the birth of a child. We think of the little child that was Jesus and the divine possibilities in each new birth. We wait for understanding, for `clarity of vision and of purpose; clarity to see and take the way that leads to peace - for us and for all creation.` (Cliff Reed)