

Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly London
The Revd Ivan Khovacs
11 December 2016
Isaiah 35.1-10; Matthew 11.2-11



Advent gestation and expectation

We may as well face it: this Advent teaching of “incarnation” is a messy business. Our belief that, in Jesus, God came to be one of us in the flesh hardly lends itself to rational explanation. And much less to the logic of academic theology.

My students in Canterbury had something to say about that this week. We were finishing the term with arguments exploring the logic of incarnation. But two of the students felt it wasn't enough master the textbook answers from the reading. So they went out to make some sense of this by getting conversation with perfect strangers. In the middle of the night, and small hours of the morning.

They volunteered for a church programme simply called Tea and Toast. The volunteers serve tea and cheese on toast to students pouring out of the clubs in Canterbury late at night. It is run mainly by church volunteers. But Tea and Toast is intended as a practice of welcome and hospitality. Not a tool for evangelism. The two students went with one question in mind: **where is God in the midst of all this?**

They insisted that the Christian teaching of Incarnation has to make sense of someone who simply needs a safe space, or someone desperate for a friendly word. Incarnation, they said, is about asking where is God for those too dazed to find their way home anytime soon? Or for someone who has lost the friends they went out with? Where is God, late at night, – the asked – for someone who isn't at all looking for God, but, on the other hand, desperately needs some company and conversation; or a listening ear?

The students described one meeting that made a particular impression on them. He was a lonely figure, they said; had gone out on his own, had far too much to drink, and hadn't

made any friends that night. When he sat down to tea at three AM and found out that the two young women serving tea and toast were theology students – completely unprompted – he offered this: **“I'm not a Christian. But I think the incarnation is that God is in you, and God is in me.”**

And after that, he had nothing else to say. The students felt strangely comforted in his company, and somehow they felt that meeting him spoke to them something of the reality of the incarnation.

It's a messy theology; and it won't be on their exam. And in fact, we relegated the rest of the lecture to the notes in the hand out. And we finished that last session of the term with other students—who fall along a wide range of beliefs and faith commitments, or none—offering some of their own stories of finding what they called “hints and guesses” of God in encounters they never expected.

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But it's just as well we're here today, because today's Advent gospel speaks a messy and not very comforting theology: John the Baptist's teaching is that Jesus is coming, therefore expect the unexpected: **“...the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; those without speech, in their joy, shall break into song; and this will be good news specially to the poor....”**

Unfortunately, the unexpected for John the Baptist is that this preaching lands him in prison. His students are understandably disheartened and confused: what kind of theology was this? If the message was from God, how could it bring John's life to such an end? So they go to visit him in prison. But John, simply points the way back to Jesus.

Why should this Advent teaching, for us, be any less difficult, any less difficult to believe than it was for John's disciples? On the other hand, should it not drive us to the question: Where is God in messiness? Where is God in midst of all this?

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True story: Mustafa can't believe his luck. He finally has a safe place to live!

He escaped Syria. But his only thought is for his wife and five young children. He left, bound for the UK, counting on some work to someday move his family to safety. For the moment, they are precariously settled across the border from Syria, in southern Lebanon.

I will never forget the screams of one of my daughters who was buried in a bombing, he says, The sound of will stay with me forever. ... We managed to dig her out and fortunately she survived.

That's when Mustafa made his decision to risk everything. He passed through Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary. Then Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and, finally, France. After about some weeks in Calais—and fater dozens of unsuccessful attempts—he finally managed to jump on a train bound for the Chunnel, and hid under a lorry with a fellow asylum hopeful.

Compared with all the bombing we ran away from, jumping the train in Calais was nothing. ... As soon as the train Calais started to go fast, we knew we had made it. We did a kind of hug with each other as best we could under the lorry because we were so happy. We had struggled so hard – but we were so happy.

When Mustafa speaks about his journey, he is wry and his face shows the weariness of war, but he has no time for self-pity:

Every day in Syria I used to look up to the sky and see birds and sunshine, fruits and vegetables growing out of the earth, and sheep and camels walking on it. Then the war started: we looked up to the sky and only saw airstrikes and helicopters. Now when we look down at the earth, we see only bombs lying on the ground.

Mustafa's asylum claim is now being processed by the Home Office, and he has been settled in the meantime in Stockton-on-Tees. But that's only after a period of enforced limbo: asylum seekers, as you know, are not allowed to work and are not able to access educational opportunities or benefits.

But Mustafa was finally granted leave to remain and so has a job working in a restaurant, and is working hard to hopefully get on with his life. Mustafa is 35, and an agricultural engineer. And he knows he is one of the lucky ones Many asylum seekers are stranded in the system for several years.

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Mustafa has learned a number of jobs in the restaurant. And he says he is consistently amazed about how friendly people have been to him. But he tells of one bad experience when a customer came into the restaurant soon after the terror attacks in Paris, just over a year ago. She walked in and asked him where he was from. When he said he was from Syria, she accused him of being a terrorist of the so-called Islamic State.

I was very angry and upset about this. I am not part of ISIS. They are the reason I ran away from Syria. So I asked her to look into my eyes: and see if you can see a terrorist there. She apologised. She hugged me. And offered to help me in any way she could.

Mustafa swells with pride when he says, I started paying taxes to the UK the day I was granted refugee status. ... In my interview I told the Home Office: I don't need any financial support from the UK. I can work. But I need help to feel safe. ... I want to return to Syria to help rebuild it. Syria is my country.

But Mustafa's only thought is for his family. Facebook and other social media helps with daily updates from home.

"I no longer know where the beginning is and where is the end. My father is still trapped and my heart breaks for him. ... I made the very dangerous journey across Europe so that my wife and children wouldn't have to.... I am working hard.... I can't wait for our reunion.

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Is this a story for Advent? Is it a story of Advent expectation? Is it a story that tells us that the world is pregnant with a God waiting to be born—in our hearts and in our thinking, waiting to transform what we say, and what we do?

Or have I got things completely wrong?

I don't pretend that there is a neat and straightforward theology in Mustafa's story. And, to be clear, it isn't advocacy for what some have called an "open borders" immigration policy. But what did you expect to find this Advent? Did you ask: where is God in the midst of all this? **If so, it may just be that there is something of the promise and expectation of Advent is in this story.**

Is this the Advent you believe in? Is this the Advent you want to live..? Is this the Advent that brings you to choose the way of Christ, today?

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God of Advent and of the unexpected, in this time waiting,
help us to rejoice in what we have.
And to want more of what you intend for us.

Help us to set aside our fears;
to put away our anger; to lay down our disappointment, in you, in ourselves, in others.
And to give up our need to always make sense of your strange and wonderful ways.

And help us to seek your coming, in the lives of others,
to find in unexpected places,
Christ gestating in hope, in faith, in the question: Where is God in the midst of this?

Help us to watch and pray—
Christ Jesus: Come!
Make your home with us,
in ever new, strange and unfamiliar ways.

Amen.

Ivan Khovacs