



## Cosy Advent? Don't bother

Advent plays quite well to the passive inclinations of many Christians. *Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.* Those were the first words of the first reading.

If you associate anything with Advent it is more likely than not to be of a comforting nature as we ready ourselves for the arrival of a friendly quantifiable God in the form of the new-born child. True: part of the role of Advent *is* to ready ourselves to celebrate Christ's birth and to receive for ourselves its great meaning.

There is another thread to this season, which goes beyond the birth at the first Christmas and anticipates his Second Coming. That is to look to Jesus' return, in glory, to judge the world. This much heralded and long awaited return still has not happened, and it's fair to say that a state of expectation of it happening any time soon is not a feature of many Christians. Even so, the theme of judgement remains as part of the churches' keeping of Advent. At least according to the book.

Being comforted and being judged don't sit easily together.

Leaving aside for a moment the religious stuff - as persons, as human *beings* - we tend to seek comfort and to fear judgement.

In our relations to one another we sometimes *withhold* comfort and *inflict* judgement. A more aware person will understand their own need of comfort, and offer it to others, and to *refrain* from judgement. Sometimes we practice both: to comfort and to judge. We are complicated things, for sure.

Our position on this spectrum depends on many factors, not least on the degree of uncertainty we have learnt to live comfortably – at least tolerably - with.

And it is also dependent upon our personal biographies: the hurts or traumas we have experienced, the degree to which we have had access to the love of others and to relative material security. It is a highly variable mix for everyone, which is why treating others tenderly is not only a duty but also a wise thing to do.

And we are shaped not just by our *personal* histories but also by our shared histories – by the stories of our times. I was reminded of this yesterday when hearing reports about the death of Fidel Castro. I was struck by different interviewees taking such dramatically different views of the man, but the thing that stayed with me most was to be reminded of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and of how close the world came to nuclear war. I was six, and I don't recall being much aware of it, but I do recall all my formative years and young adulthood being overshadowed by the Cold War and the fear of a nuclear holocaust – and of being prepared for that at school by being shown how to take refuge under our desks. We knew even then that was whistling in the wind. It was a time of fear in which to grow up, and it left its mark.

For many here, except the most recently arrived, we have lived through troubling times and events. Shared traumas that have made *their* mark: wars, invasions, humanitarian and economic crises, 9/11 and other terrorist acts, the untrustworthiness of institutions and some public figures, worry about the environment, worry about

factionalism and nationalism rearing its head, worry about the impulse behind the surge in hate crimes.

What I am wanting to draw attention to is that fear, anxiety, and trauma of some kind or another is common to most of us. Some relates to our personal history, some to our shared, collective history. Some of it we can be consciously aware of, some if it will be buried and unconscious, still waiting to be brought into the light.

Has Advent anything to say about this?

Well, quite possibly. But only if we take the season, shake it free of all cosiness and platitudes, and wonder afresh at what it might mean to get ready to greet this God who seems to so urgently want, for love's sake, to meet us.

For our part that requires some realism and courage; some looking in the mirror – personal and collective. I have observed that this is not very easy. Largely we are unmotivated. Too comforted already you might say. And largely of the wrong kind of comfort. The hiding away, ticking-over-nicely-enough kind of comfort rather than that of knowing we stand in some purposeful way to the persistent questions of meaning: who am I?, what is life's purpose?, what is the purpose of *my* life?

The great obstacle is familiarity. The Gospel message, ostensibly kept alive and transmitted by the church over the long power-lines of history, easily loses its voltage. It no longer shocks or jolts. If you can step away from that insulating familiarity for a while, it is certainly possible that the stories of Advent, Christmas, Holy Week and Easter can be encountered again at full voltage.

Two conditions appear to hold out this possibility. **One is crisis, the other is love.**

A crisis is a kind of judgement. We are brought low, and stripped of many illusions, left raw and very often scared. It can be a personal or a collective crisis: ill-health, job loss, relationship pain or break-ups; collectively maybe loss of trustworthy systems or a humane balance of political consensus, a loss of shared identity or catastrophes of war or environment.

What is common to such things is the severe disruption of our all-too-comfortable comforts. Crises of these kinds are never nice, and they may threaten you (so you think) with the destruction of your very self. Yet, within such visitations are the seeds of radical new growth, and the possibility of moving into a new understanding of God's purpose.

The far less distressing route is via love. Not – of course – in any sugary sense. More to do with falling into a way of seeing others and the whole of creation as a lovefest: supported, animated, shot-through with positive purpose and possibility. It is tricky to describe, and easy to muddle. Let's leave it with John (Jn 1.4.16): 'God is Love, and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them'.

We can't engineer a crisis (and why would we even think of doing so?); and we can't flick a switch and start engaging with the world, ourselves and God with the love we are told is characteristic of the mystic saints.

But for those who want to, we can simply start to step aside from our habitual routines of life, thought, opinions, platitudes, fantasies and fears and ask God to prepare a way in our souls and in our world. It's a perfectly good first step. It is a *hopeful* first step. And it fits well with the call of Advent.

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