

an advent of promise & yearning

Advent is a season of promise and yearning. It is the promise of Christ's return to the world, to judge what is evil. The yearning is our aching need to see Christ heal what is broken, restore the world to God's purposes, and reconcile humanity to the love for which we are made: love of God, love of one another, love of the creation.

As today's Gospel scripture tells us: *Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in the clouds" with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. 'So, from the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that He is near, at the very gates.*

But spare a thought for those of us who would like to see Christ's return sooner rather than later. And when I say sooner, I really mean "now." Because we really need it.

I've been away in the States for some weeks, doing some academic work. And I've been nothing less than horrified to see the far-reaching sin of sexual harassment and overpowering of women in the workplace, along with revelations about well-known personalities from the American media. In at least two cases, it involves people I grew up admiring—one a liberal cultural commentator, and the other a storyteller and radio broadcaster.

It seems trite to say that I want to "honour" women of courage who have brought this story into the light. But allow me to be trite, and along with many others, honour the women of courage who have come forward to tell their stories, making themselves vulnerable, and in painful detail exposing the oppressive working environments. They've also exposed how often their complaints fell on deaf ears.

There must be so many more women, still unable to speak publically, even as they take heart that others have been able to call out corporate sin. Ultimately, though, I yearn for justice for those women, and for all who have been affected. **And even if I don't know what that justice would look like, I want to say, – holding on to that promise of Advent – "Come Lord Jesus, with justice and mourning..."**

It's not just that we must work to ensure that the predatory interplay of power and sexuality, in the workplace – and at all levels – cannot not be allowed to go on. That goes without saying. If I'm hearing the words of Scripture correctly, Advent trains our eyes on the coming Christ precisely because there is so much brokenness, so much that brings us to mourning. In the Revelation of St John we read: ... in those days they will say "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him. And all the peoples of the earth will mourn."

Spare a thought, and when I say that, I mean expect and anticipate. Keep awake, mourn, and pray.

Spare a thought for Harry, who says he was inspired by childhood Catholic faith and the words of John F Kennedy, at his inaugural address in 1961: "We must ask God's blessing, and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own." I think Harry has learned to make God's work truly his own. Harry, in fact, has a message for this church: "Tell your people in London," Harry said to me, "that this is the year I go solar."

I met Harry down at the beach, in my hometown of Santa Barbara. We were both looking at a flaming, reddish sun setting over the Pacific Ocean. Harry wanted me to be clear about one thing. He said, "Some people call me Harry the Homeless. But that's not true. **This is my home.**" **Harry pointed to his bicycle. A modified cycle**

attached to a welded shelter structure: it had bedding, a storage facility, a bookshelf lined with paperbacks, some cooking utensils, a lantern, a radio, and a portable DVD player.

Harry combs the beaches and streets of Santa Barbara collecting metal scraps that he takes to a recycling facility. He also makes a bit of cash feeding and caring for the guard dogs at the facility. Recycling is really important to Harry. He says it's his way of saving the planet. And he is working hard on reducing his carbon footprint to a minimum. Harry has got the books from the library, and knows exactly what he needs to power his light, radio, and DVD player at night without using batteries. Another reduction in his carbon output. He is working to raise the money for two portable solar panels. When I asked Harry if I can share a bit of his story with my church, he said, yes, and tell them that "This is the year when I go solar."

Harry is only one man, with only a modest plan. But there is nothing modest about his love of the planet. In fact, if we pull back from that scene – one man on the beach, standing before a California sunset, contriving how to do his part for healing the planet – if we pull back far enough, I think we will find that that one man's love of creation is already pregnant with the promise in the prophet Malachi in his vision of the end of time, when "The Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings..." This too is the promise and yearning of Advent.

Spare a thought – and when I say a thought, I mean a prayer of gratitude – for the asylum seeker, who sat with me over breakfast. **He asked me why I came to London, and how I like it here. Then he told me something of his story. A story I can only summarise with the words courage, strength of spirit, and hope.** And he reflected on why being here means so much to him.

"Everyone thinks we come here for money. For me it's different. Where I come from, there is no

law for me. The law is for the other people. I come from the mountains, and my family line means nothing. Here, I live on the streets. But I know that the law is the same for me. And for everyone else."

Let me be trite once again: spare a thought, – and when I say "spare a thought," I mean hunger and thirst, – for the depths of humanity and neighbourly love in a church family in which the experience of exile from homeland and family is part of our collective wound. It is who we are. And it is part of what makes this community yearn for Advent.

In our second week of Advent, our prayers will be – as it were – caught-up, and intermingled with [items of clothing suspended above the nave](#). Arabella Dorman's art installation will be a sort of canopy suspended above our worship space. Arabella has salvaged clothing left behind by refugees arriving on the Island of Lesbos and will assemble them in a kind of suspended motion to say something of the vulnerable lives of men, women, and children, fleeing violence, persecution, and war. And I can only hope that Arabella's suspended installation will – once again, lift our yearning eyes to heaven – and coin for us the Advent message that "Christ is coming. Refugees are welcome here!"

Regina Walton: Advent poem
The Yearning Life

Wax tablet and stylus in hand beneath the trees,
the hermit priest parses the soul's progress into thirds
Lives active, contemplative, and between them
the Yearning life,
where you rest in constant restlessness
Having made a start, but not yet
abandoning self into the heart of light.
Where each holy favour, eagerly awaited,
consumed,
only melts into more craving.

Ivan Khovacs