



Going AWOL

You will see from the service sheet that today is described in two ways: *The Sunday Next before Advent* and *Christ the King*. '*The Sunday Next before Advent*' sounds rather quaint don't you think, and to my ears unwittingly embodies that besetting feature of humankind, the tendency to excuse ourselves from the present by too much anticipation of the future. And here we find that habit embodied in the church's very structure. Here we are on one Sunday, defined by its relationship to the next...

More than that, the church has an entire season devoted to this 'looking forward'. Advent begins a week today (you will have worked that out, I'm sure) and is usually described as a season of expectant anticipation as Christians await the Nativity, Jesus's birth, celebrated at Christmas.

Not all looking forward is bad. Some of it is necessary, even essential and we could not do without it. Yet, that necessity is often negated by the amount of time we humans spend going AWOL¹ from the present and transporting ourselves, often unprofitably and with varying degrees of distress, to the past or the future.

How often do you catch yourself recalling the past or anticipating the future – dwelling there, in fact? Some of us are so caught up in these modes of being that we don't spot it happening at all. Yet, if you were to have a go at distilling the best teaching on life, it might well boil down to *how to be present to the moment*.

¹ AWOL: common abbreviation for 'absent without leave'. A military term that has crept into common usage. Means absent from where one should be but without intent to desert.

Christmas is indeed on its way; and Advent is the period when the church says to us 'look, I know you are busy, but it could be profitable for you to do a bit of housekeeping so that when you keep that Feast, you make the very best you can of its meaning'. That sounds sensible. And it begins to clarify things a little, for it asks us to do this preparatory housekeeping *from the present moment* and not from somewhere else.

And not only *from the present moment, but from the particularity of our own life*, and not from any other. Another trait to be spotted in humans, in addition to going AWOL to the present, is to go AWOL to ourselves. I don't know about you, but the apocalyptic judgement we were given just now by Matthew (sheep and goats, left and right, eternal damnation) is nothing compared to the hard time I can give myself. The '*if only I was* (fill in the blanks as appropriate)' litany, often ticking over in our minds at both the conscious and unconscious levels, is pure poison. At their worst, these trends prevent us from being present *and* from being ourselves.

I like the line (you might know it, attributed to various sources, none of which appear to be reliable) which says: *Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken*. Indeed they are.

Not being present and not being ourselves are, if you chose to look at them in this way, offences against the God who gave us both the present *and* ourselves. And if not offences, at the very least, ingratitude. We should try to do better.

But better, how? Well, by living as much as we can in the present; and by being, as fully as we can, ourselves. I accept this can sound trite –

populist hokum. And both these injunctions can lead to fakery and fraud. Thomas Merton saw this, when he wrote “In an age where there is much talk about “being yourself” I reserve to myself the right to forget about being myself...it seems to me that when [you are] too intent on “being [your]self” [you] run the risk of impersonating a shadow.” True enough, and a helpful caution.

Like many growth spurts in our interior and moral lives, these things are both harder and simpler than we might imagine. There are some steps that are worth trying. Paying *attention* has been found by many to be a door into the present. To pay more focussed attention by listening; looking; touching; making; walking; eating – with whatever detachment you can summon and without judgement as far as that can be managed. *Seeing* one another as equal manifestations of an astonishing mystery. Giving *yourself* the kind of care and help you’d give in a heartbeat to others but strangely sometimes withhold from yourself.

The gift we say was made by God to humankind at Christmas isn’t ‘renewed’ in some functional way every 25 December, like some insurance policy or TV Licence that might otherwise expire. It has been made, given fully and without terms and conditions. It is fully accessible. It is here, now. Never less so. It is only when we go AWOL, from the present or from ourselves (often both) that we lose sight of this wonder. It remains forever close, ever present, encompassing all things as no other truth can.

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Today is also kept by the church as *Christ the King*. It was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius XI partly in response to the feared rise in secularism across Europe, and later incorporated into the Church of England calendar.

It’s intention is to honour Christ ‘in majesty’: *Christus Rex*. You see this particular perspective on him in the great east window above my head, at the very top. In visual depictions it is almost invariably shown as Christ in the trappings of kingship and worldly power and as a reigning monarch. To some of us, this approach looks like a misreading of the Gospels in what they suggest about Jesus and his message. He had authority rather than power.

And we are reminded virtually every day that power harms those who hold it and those over whom it is exercised. Indeed, the abuse of gender-based power is prominently in the headlines. Again.

You can see why a post-Constantinian church was rather taken with power. We might view it as a distortion introduced by muddled human beings. The Gospels describe Jesus as not coming to glory except by way of the Cross. And this state of ‘glory’ is one of true and abiding loving union and proximity to God the Creator, and nothing to do with outward pomp or temporal power. True, he is to reign in our hearts, but not by the imposition of power but the power of love.

Today is also known in the trade as ‘Stir-up Sunday’ from Archbishop Cranmer’s Prayer Book Collect which begins *Stir up we beseech thee O Lord the wills of thy faithful people....* Cranmer’s Collects and prayers became notable for many reasons, the beauty of the language and construction for sure, though this one especially because it served as a reminder to get stirring the pudding mix in time for Christmas.

The idea of our being ‘stirred up’ catches my imagination more than the idea of Christ the King. Neither, though, as much as the idea of our moving ever more towards being fully present in the moment and most fully ourselves.

All these themes are linked in various ways. Linked, of course, in the Christian perspective, by

love. There's a second sermon on its way this morning which says more about it – and in fewer words – than this one. We shall hear it as we sing it following the Peace. As you sing it, please weigh the words, and the images. It was written by a Church of England priest called William Vanstone who died in 1999 and they first appeared in his book *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*. In so short a span of six verses he seems to say so much about the many ways in which we may encounter God, about this business of God's love for us, and about power and authority rightly understood.

Here Christ's authority is more compellingly described than in any number of orb'd and sceptre'd representations. This is William Vantstone's final verse:

"Here is God: no monarch he / throned in easy state to reign / here is God, whose arms of love / aching, spent, the world sustain."

And you and I are invited into this same mystery, and all that is required of us is to be present, and to be most fully ourselves. Amen.

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