

A Season of Song
A series of seasonal meditations from John Rackley

Sunday 6 December 2020 (Advent 2)

*Lo he comes with clouds descending
Once for favoured sinners slain;
Thousand thousand saints attending
Swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluia!
God appears on earth to reign.*

By Charles Wesley. Written in 1754 based on an earlier hymn by John Cennick.
(*Singing the Faith*, 177)

We are a long way from dusty paths to Bethlehem in this hymn. We are drawn into the future beyond all futures, and asked to contemplate the return of Jesus the Lord, Immanuel. God is present among the peoples of the world and it is time for the Judgement. The demanding apocalyptic imagery of the Hebrews scriptures, and Revelation in the New Testament, confront us with the ultimate question of existence: *Why?*

One Friday night I was called to a home where a young man had locked himself in his room and had started throwing items out into the street. As the nearest resident 'man of God' the neighbours thought I could help!

I grew to know the family well after that. The son longed to be an author and emulate Tolkien. He wrote long sagas full of mysterious creatures and events. His mother was a matter-of-fact woman who found this disconcerting. In our conversations she demonstrated clearly that she was an atheist by conviction and she scrutinised intensely my fumbling attempts to explain my belief in God. She in effect became my tutor in Christian apologetics and I vividly recall her response to the idea of the Second Coming of Christ and the Last Judgment:

"If you believe in your sort of God, you have to believe in the reckoning. There must be a time when it is all made clear and justice is seen to be done. Why else has my son suffered so much?"

For her it was all a matter of the triumph of right over wrong. There had to be an unveiling of the truth. There had to be a future when in the words of the Psalmist 'steadfast love and faithfulness meet, righteousness and peace join hands.' She could not bring herself to believe this but expected me to know my God – or at least what I had signed up for.

This is why this hymn has a place in Advent. Advent has a serious side to it. Armies still march toward violence. Children still die for lack of clean water. Anxiety crushes hope and sinful ambition creates estrangement from God. Is there no redemption? Is there no reckoning? The child who cries in frustrated hope and angry disbelief *'that's wrong and it's not fair'* is giving voice to the deep human conviction that our universe cannot be simply a cold impersonal mass of energy. In that cry we hear an Advent longing for an answer to the question: *Why?*

Father Alfred Delp was a Jesuit priest opposed the Nazi regime and was hung for treason in 1945 because he planned a new Christian future for his country after the war rather than supporting the distorted dreams of National Socialism. In a collection of his writings published in 1956, there is a meditation entitled *The Shaking Reality of Advent*. He describes Advent as 'a time when we all ought to be shaken and brought to a realisation of ourselves'.

This is why Advent is the start of the New Year in the church calendar. It is a time to ponder the quality of our ethical life in the light of God's coming glory.

Henry Burton, a Wesleyan Methodist, wrote some hundred years after Charles Wesley:

*There's a light upon the mountains
And the day is at the spring,
When our eyes shall see the beauty,
And the glory of the King;
Weary was our heart with waiting,
And the night-watch seemed so long;
And we shall hail him with a song.
(Singing the Faith, 188)*

This is the Advent of the future tense. We may look back to tell a story of a special birth but, as our Lord's Prayer directs us, it is *from the future* that the action of God will always come. How we live now will decide how we welcome this next arrival.

*Hark! We hear a distant music,
And it comes with fuller swell;
'tis the triumph-song of Jesus,
Of our King Immanuel:
Zion, go forth to meet him;
And, my soul, be swift to bring
All your finest and your noblest
For the triumph of our King!*

Are we listening?

Prayer:

God of Cloud and Glory,
we often live too much in the day-to-day;
help us to have an eye to your future
and listen out for your love-song
for all your creation;
so that our vision is enlarged
and our hopes bright with delight
through all our days.
Amen.