

First Sunday in Advent 27 Nov 2016

[Isaiah 2: 1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13: 9-14; Matthew 24: 36-44](#) from Vanderbilt

[Advent 1A November 27, 2016](#) from Textweek

The first Sunday of Advent and we herald the start of this new year with the anthem “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”. We start a new year, and yet can we actually ‘start anew’? The season of Advent is so full of contradictions; the tradition, the readings of Advent and even the overall direction or movement of Advent all give us contradicting or confusing messages...

Within our Church tradition Advent is commonly seen as a season of preparation for Christmas; however, what preparations are necessary very much depends on our understanding of Christmas; so we might consider more closely what is our experience of Advent?

Is this a time of waiting, waiting for the Messiah; probably yes for the UWA choir.

Is it a time for keeping awake, ready to be surprised by Christmas; probably yes for those that have arranged extended trading times.

Is it a time of movement toward the coming of light, a time when all darkness will be dispelled; probably yes for those in the Northern hemisphere who will experience the mid-winter solstice just before Christmas day.

Is it a time to make ready to party to celebrate Jesus’ birthday; probably yes for many Christians, and for everyone who loves a party.

Perhaps this year we might each more fully explore the whole process of Advent for ourselves, and also share in an exploration of both Advent and Christmas.

We can choose to be more aware and more attentive to the readings and symbols, but not only with the lens of tradition, let’s not look for a repeat and a replay of ‘last year’; but rather look for something new, let’s seek to look behind the scenes and beyond the usual.

This week some of us shared in an introduction to T.S.Elliot’s Four Quartets; and there is a delightful passage that speaks of the time between scene changes at the theatre:

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness,
And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant panorama
And the bold imposing facade are all being rolled away-

This Advent, let’s start in the dark and know that last year, and all that is past, has been moved off the stage; and then each of us can create a new scene for ourselves as we approach our nativity.

By way of example, let’s start with the Advent anthem; “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”.

If we ask ourselves what are we saying and to whom are we voicing our song, we might be surprised.

Are we really asking God to come to us?

Do we believe that we can direct God?

Who, where and how does this God hear and listen to you and to me?

Perhaps we've been singing the song upside down; what if this song is really an echo; actually us echoing a God-song that is sung to us?

What if it is you and me that are being invited to "come"?

In the first reading from Isaiah we hear:

"3 Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.""

Notice that it is the people who give voice to the invitation; and so in our reconstruction of the Advent stage we might sing this anthem internally, one part of us inviting another part of ourselves on to the stage of life.

God is with us, already; that is the primary revelation of Christ; God is not coming at Christmas, that was Santa in another story altogether.

And if God is with us, then the Advent anthem might be for us a mantra inviting ourselves into the wholeness of Emmanuel; God with us, an invitation for us to awaken the Divine within.

And now let's look at the overall Advent journey, and let's not go back 2000 years or more and follow the footsteps of Mary and Joseph; but rather let's more fully appreciate the symbolism and the spiritual insights of the narrative for us today.

Advent is a time for being refugees; Mary and Joseph left Nazareth for Bethlehem, and they will be exiled to Egypt after the nativity the birth has been realised.

It is a time for leaving 'home', for letting go of all that possesses us, all that we hang on to; a time for emptying and opening ourselves to the possibility and potential of birth, Divine birth;

"and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

Every day, yes every day we see and hear of refugees; and every day we don't see and we don't hear.

Every day we see the pregnant potential held symbolically by Mary and Joseph; and every day we don't see.

This week I met Naushad Nosarka and his family in the Church garden, and his father told me a story about refugees.

At the time of the Muslim conquest of Persia, the dominant religion of the region was Zoroastrianism. Iranians rebelled against Arab invaders for almost 200 years; in Iran this period is now known as the "Period of Silence"; perhaps T.S.Elliot's "*darkness of God*". During this time

many Iranians who are now called Parsi chose to preserve their religious identity by fleeing from Iran to India; they became refugees.

Jadi Rana is a figure from the *Qissa-i Sanjan*, an epic poem completed in 1599, which is an account of the flight of these Parsi refugees who were subject to religious persecution following the fall of the Sassanid Empire, and of their early years in India, where they found refuge.

Jadi Rana according to the poem was a Hindu king in what is now the Indian state of Gujarat, and he had a reputation for fairness that preceded him, which prompted some of the Parsees who were fleeing religious persecution to seek asylum in his kingdom.

One interesting, perhaps apocryphal Parsi legend relates the course of the initial meeting between Jadi Rana and the newly landed emigrants: When the refugees requested asylum, Jadi Rana motioned to a vessel of milk filled to the very brim to signify that his kingdom was already full and could not accept refugees. In response, one of the Zoroastrian priests added a pinch of sugar to the milk, thus indicating that they would not bring the vessel to overflowing and indeed make the lives of the citizens sweeter. Jadi Rana gave shelter to the emigrants and permitted them to practice their religion and traditions freely.

And the reality of the Parsi refugees according to Wikipedia seems to bear out the legend of sugar in the milk.

Over the centuries since the first Zoroastrians arrived in India, the Parsis have integrated themselves into Indian society while simultaneously maintaining or developing their own distinct customs and traditions (and thus ethnic identity). However, after over a thousand years of admixture with the local population, they have been shown to be genetically closer to their locals than their Iranian ancestors. And interestingly a 2004 study in which Parsi mitochondrial DNA (matrilineal) was compared with that of the Iranians and Gujaratis determined that Parsis are genetically closer to Gujaratis than to Iranians.

To put a face to these Parsi refugees they leave a rich legacy of well-known individuals; Jamsetji Tata was an Indian pioneer industrialist, who founded the Tata Group, conductor Zubin Mehta, and Freddie Mercury, lead singer of Queen

And as we walk into Advent, the season of Refugees, we like Mary and Joseph should be expectant with the birth of something new, creative and divine within ourselves.

Peter Humphris