

*Advent IV Sermon by Dean Spalding. For Advent 4 Sunday 20 December 2020.*

Some would say that Advent has three strands to its WAITING.

Waiting for Christmas—our remembrance of Jesus' First Coming.

Waiting for Jesus' Second Coming—which rather than a 'fringe belief' or optional dimension of Christianity is one of *the most orthodox*, well-attested of Christian beliefs. These days the Second Coming suffers from being side-lined and left to the fringe 'right' who tend to distort the ideas and from time to time invent the type of dates-certitude that Jesus specifically warned about.

But a third and more subtle and elusive type of waiting—waiting upon the stranger whom God will bring into our midst—the stranger who needs accommodation or feeding, the hungry, the thirsty, the poor, the imprisoned, the sick—in whom, Jesus assures us, we will find Him. “When you did these things (feeding, clothing, visiting) for the least of those brothers and sisters—you did it for me” (paraphrase of Matt 25:40).

Regardless of exactly how you conceive of the *manner* of the waiting, the one thing we can be sure of is the *object* of that waiting. The *object* of our waiting is *Jesus*. Last week, in Advent III, Revd Tracy Lauersen inspired me in her sermon about waiting for Jesus and suggested that if we're waiting for a Jesus made in our image, not only are we short-changing ourselves, but we are setting ourselves up for *disappointment*. The Jesus for whom we wait is a fully 3-dimensional person with challenging complexity and beauty and truthfulness sometimes beyond our comprehension. But to help us get an accurate picture of *him for whom we wait*, we are blessed with four gospels that paint Jesus in all his complexity and we do well to soak in *each* of those, and, in this Year in particular, to soak in Mark's rich vision of Jesus. And scripture also assures us that beyond the written word we have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7)—who will further reveal Jesus to us, if we will only be open to that Spirit.

But today I will stick with the scriptures especially around the advent scriptures of *waiting; expectations* about *what Jesus the Messiah should be like*.

First to the wonderful 'Annunciation'—here, of course we have detoured to Luke (Luke 1:26-38)—but Luke understands much about the waiting for the Messiah, in particular those First-Century expectations around the Messiah that were so common in the oppressed Israel under Roman occupation in the First Century. Mary's *Magnificat* (today's 'Psalm alternative') is a song of *rebellion*. There is a fine but important line between “God will bring the powerful down from their throne...”, and “...and we will join in and help Him by bearing arms against them!” Add in the surrounding conversation between Elizabeth and Mary ('Blessed art thou among women...') which evokes the memory of

women like Jael (Judges 5:24-26) who drove a tent peg through an Assyrian captain's temple, and Judith (Judith 13:18) who took off the head of an Assyrian captain, and we see more clearly Elisabeth and Mary's potential for joining much of their countrymen in hoping for a militaristic messiah. If we strip away the piety with which we have burdened the *Magnificat*—we have a potential rebel song that wouldn't sound misplaced if sung by 'Bold Fenian Men' or Communist Militia or Eureka Stockaid rebels. Bring down the powerful from their thrones! Fill the hungry with good things. Send the rich away empty! That's why I appreciate Rory Cooney's paraphrase of the *Magnificat* set to the tune Star of the County Down—it wouldn't sound out of place on the lips of a Bold Fenian Man or at Eureka.

*1. My soul cries out with a joyful shout  
that the God of my heart is great,  
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things  
that you bring to the ones who wait.  
You fixed your sight on your servant's plight,  
and my weakness you did not spurn,  
So from east to west shall my name be blest.  
Could the world be about to turn?*

*Refrain  
My heart shall sing of the day you bring.  
Let the fires of your justice burn.  
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,  
and the world is about to turn!*

*2. Though I am small, my God, my all,  
you work great things in me,  
And your mercy will last from the depths of the past  
to the end of the age to be.  
Your very name puts the proud to shame,  
and to those who would for you yearn,  
You will show your might, put the strong to flight,  
for the world is about to turn.*

*3. From the halls of power to the fortress tower,  
not a stone will be left on stone.  
Let the king beware for your justice tears  
ev'ry tyrant from his throne.  
The hungry poor shall weep no more,  
for the food they can never earn;*

*there are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed,  
for the world is about to turn.*

*4. Though the nations rage from age to age,  
we remember who holds us fast:  
God's mercy must deliver us  
from the conqueror's crushing grasp.  
This saving word that our forebears heard  
is the promise which holds us bound,  
'til the spear and rod can be crushed by God,  
who is turning the world around.*

But here's a lesson *in the Jesus we weren't expecting* and perhaps still aren't expecting, but perhaps who we ought to have been expecting. Turns out that Jesus wasn't going to be a militarist like his great, great, great ... grandfather David. The real Jesus will say "put away your sword", "those who live by the sword will die by the sword", "turn the other cheek" and "love your enemies" (Matt 5:39, 5:44, 26:52). Even his cousin John in this regard also turns out to be a disappointment to his 'Fenian' mother Elizabeth and her close relative Mary. In John's sermons, far from telling Israel to rebel against the Roman Empire John suggest ways that they can accommodate Rome while remaining righteous and distinctive in their faith positions—defeating the Empire and its godless values from within (Luke 3:12-14).

SO if you're still anticipating a Jesus who will fight with weapons or use control or domination for "our side" –you will be disappointed.

Seeking consolation from the disappointment of passivist Jesus, we might be tempted to say "well Jesus may not take up arms, but as a Rabbinical teacher at least he will be good at explaining that God is on our side, and exclusively on our side."

Again, if that's your expectation, Jesus will disappoint you. The Jesus of scripture will come commending people of mixed national origins for their faith. He will commend out and out foreigners for their faith, sometimes expressly making comparison to faithlessness among his own mob (Matthew 7:9; 8:10). On one famous occasion he takes a text that should lend itself to the "vengeance of the Lord" (it was Advent Three's Old Testament reading from Isaiah 61) and instead takes it to talk up God's ironic preference for blessing foreigners in Old Testament times (Luke 4:25-27). That makes the Nazareth synagogue so mad they want to hurl this dud Messiah off the nearest cliff (Luke 4:29).

***The first advent of Jesus dealt harshly with misplaced expectations.***

***Have we any residual misplaced expectations of Jesus?***

Expecting a Jesus to affirm that children should be seen and not heard? Sorry, this Jesus will affirm the inclusion of children precisely because they were of the least value in the first century. And in the wider world today that are still among the most vulnerable, and Jesus will still champion them.

Expecting a Jesus who will confirm respectability, reputation and one's standing in one's social set? The Jesus who came the first time, the same Jesus who will come again will disappoint! He associated with the most suspect, colourful and questionable characters of his day—tax-collectors and prostitutes. Jesus' inclusion of folk in all their diversity is stunning: among his twelve closest associates he included a zealot (essential a pro-Israel, anti-Roman terrorist) and a tax-collector (a conspicuous Roman collaborator).

Expecting a Jesus who will affirm conservative attitudes to the submission of women, consignment of women to the status beneath the 'headship' of men? Again, the Jesus who came the first time, the same Jesus who will come again, will shock and disappoint. He will have unsupervised open-air conversations with Samaritan women about theology that will leave the Messiah excited to the point of loss of appetite (John 4:32-34). He will engage traditional women's realm to the point that women will expect Jesus to arbitrate women-to-women conflicts (Luke 10:40) and to the point where his own parabolic story telling will be replete with images drawn from the inside of the kitchen. Every gospel writer will attest to women who were not only among the followers of Jesus but were primary to the success of the peripatetic ministry. Jesus will support Jesus' itinerant ministry through their resourcefulness, organisation and management (Luke 8:1-3). Each gospel writer will also attest that the women in Jesus' life were the most open to having their minds changed by the message of the messiah, where the men proved resistant—and one suspects that this is why they are also more conspicuously present with Jesus after his arrest and preeminent as the first and utterly reliable witnesses to the resurrection.

Expecting a Jesus upon whom you can look in comfort, who will baptize your status-quo, who will not only "meet you where you're at" but be content to *leave* you there to live out your days in complacency? Well look again! Looking upon Jesus should be no more comfortable than looking into a rising sun on a cloudless summer's day. For all its beauty and life-giving potential, it will hurt.

Yes, we're waiting for Jesus. Make sure your expectations have been shaped by the one who came among us the first time! But make sure you're waiting for the right fella!

The ancient church had a way of shaping their expectation and waiting and anticipation of *Jesus* in the last seven days of Advent always starting on the 18<sup>th</sup> December. They would evoke Jesus to come again by singing the seven "O Antiphons"—one each day for the last seven days of advent—seven songs that

all commenced with the exclamation “O”. O Wisdom of God, O LORD; O Root of Jesse; O Key of David; O King of Kings; O Emmanuel—literally “God With Us”. These songs are older than English (back to the 6<sup>th</sup> Century?) and they were originally sung in Latin. The Key words for Wisdom, Lord, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Rising Sun, King of Kings and Emmanuel in Latin were Sapientia, Adonai, Radix, Clavis, Oriens, Rex; Emmanuel; and the first letter of each key word built up in reverse the phrase “Ero Cras” which translated means “tomorrow he comes!”

TOMORROW HE COMES! BUT make sure you’re anticipating the right Jesus! The titles for the Messiah (Wisdom, King, God With Us) *alone* are no guarantee against a misdirected anticipations.

I have a contemporary challenge for the last days of 2020’s Advent. A crowd-funded church-project from a church with a group of cinema producers last year filmed and made available a deeply scriptural and well-researched cinematographic-portrayal of Jesus called “**The Chosen**”: There are eight episodes in the first season. They are all freely available on “The Chosen” App or on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/c/TheChosenSeries/featured> So, in the place of singing “O Antiphons”, (which are a little *passé*) watch two episodes of “The Chosen” tonight, two on Monday night, and then one for each night of the remaining nights of Advent. Check what you see against the authority of scripture, but it may just be a reminder of the Jesus for whom we wait.

If you are expecting a Jesus who will reward our church attendance, who will reward our piety in making wonderful public prayers, reward our long-service of the church, be impressed by our philanthropy; and who will withhold blessing from the unchurched—you would have been disappointed by the First Advent of Jesus and you will undoubtedly be disappointed with he who comes to us in the Second Coming.

But if your heart sings with the recounting of his First Coming, if you love the one who was always in trouble for the company he kept, his daring pronouncement of the forgiveness that God extends towards sinners, if your heart sings at the First Coming of him who made the impartiality of God clearer, who rejoices to set the captive free and to bind up the broken....then you are in a season of joyous remembrance of the character and passion of the Jesus who came upon the midnight clear, and who promises us that He will return. *Come, Lord Jesus, come! Amen.*