

Advent 3: Already, and not yet, but not never

St. Brandon's

Isaiah 61: 1-4; 8-end; John 1: 6-8; 19-28

13 December 2020

Already, and not yet, but not never. That probably sounds a bit like a riddle – what's he talking about now? But it's not meant to be. It is, I think, a summary of Advent in three parts and just seven words. Already ... and not yet ... but not never.

But OK, if it is a bit riddle-like then it needs some explanation. So let's begin with the reading from John's Gospel. There we find John the Baptist, and he is, of course, one of the key players in the Advent narrative. That's why he gets two weeks out of four – both last week and this. And it's important that we focus on him and not get too close to the Christmas narrative and the Christ child – not yet, at least. That's part of what Advent is all about, as I've already said – wait for that, because it's not yet happened, concentrate on the now.

The first part of what the Gospel of John says about John the Baptist is that he *was* a man sent from God, who *came* as a witness to the light. Notice the past tenses – was, came. This is, therefore, part of the 'already', part of what has already happened. But, of course, there's more to the 'already' than that. When asked who he is, John eventually gets round to saying that he is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness – a reference, as we're told, to Isaiah (40: 3). So John is connecting himself to the 'already' of the OT. But in fact there's even more than that, because John is actually the last and, in a sense, the greatest of the OT prophets, pointing as he does to the one who is coming after him, to Christ.

So the 'already' that John represents is really the whole of the OT. What do we understand already from that great narrative? Well, to keep this short, I think we can summarise the OT in three points: that humankind is made in the image of God; that God's steadfast love towards His people never varied or failed; and that while His people sometimes responded with love in return, they also generally mucked things up – which is why John speaks really only one word to the people of his day: *repent*. And while that's a very brief summary, it's a pretty massive 'already'. And, of course, it's an 'already' that we inherit. We already know and believe all of that, and what it implies. That's the first part of Advent.

But beyond the 'already', Advent is also about the 'not yet'. We've already seen that John's Gospel says of John the Baptist that he came as a witness to the light. And it goes on, 'The true light, which enlightens everyone, *was coming* into the world'. Notice the tense of the verb again – the light which enlightens everyone hasn't arrived yet, but He is on His way. And John the Baptist himself says the same thing: 'Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who *is coming* after me'. He's not quite here yet, but you can be sure that He is on His way.

So there is a 'not yet' about Advent, there's anticipation, there ought to be excitement at what God is about to do next, because the whole story is clearly building to some kind of climax. But not yet, we're still in the 'already', even if we can begin to glimpse the 'not yet', and the way the story is about to unfold.

I want to say a little more about the 'not yet' drawing from our OT reading from Isaiah. The first part – 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good

news to the oppressed ...', and so on, is familiar to us because, of course, these are the words Jesus uses as part of His manifesto in Nazareth, recorded in Luke's Gospel (4: 18-19). There is an 'already' about this because the tense of the verbs is present and past – 'the spirit of the Lord *is* upon me; he *has* anointed and sent me', so that while we might regard these as prophecy that was fulfilled in Jesus, there's also an appropriate sense in which we should regard them as part of the 'already' of the OT that is part of Advent that we inherit. But most of the rest of the passage from Isaiah is different, because it is mostly in the future tense – 'They *will* be called oaks of righteousness ... they *shall* build up the ancient ruins ... I *will* make an everlasting covenant with them ... I *will* greatly rejoice in the Lord' says the prophet, because 'the Lord God *will* cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations'. These are all future promises so that, at least at the time they were spoken, they had not yet been fulfilled. And they are all part of the 'not yet' of our Advent too.

Now I hope that that has helped to explain two thirds of the riddle with which I began – that Advent is about 'already' and 'not yet'. I'll come back to the third part 'but not never' towards the end. But, you may well be thinking 'So what?', and wondering how all of that might help us on our Advent journey.

Well, let me try to answer that by posing two questions. First, what is the 'already' of my / your relationship with God? Advent is a time to consider what we have already come to know, what we already believe, how we have already responded to God in our relationship with Him. In considering that, there will almost certainly be things to celebrate. We are made in the image of God. God's steadfast love towards us has never varied or failed. We have responded to love with love. And doubtless you could add more that are true for you. We can and should enjoy that part of the 'already' of our relationship with God. And the key virtues here to enable us to do that are love in response to God's love for us, and thankfulness for all He has already done.

But then there may well be other parts of the 'already' of our relationship with God that are rather less positive. As the OT tells us, we are pretty good at mucking things up. So the one word that John the Baptist really speaks – *repent* – may well be appropriate here for us too. To be personal for a moment, one of the things that has been borne in on me this year is how outside events (Brexit, climate change, the vast inequalities in the world, the pandemic – I mean how much sanitizer does it take to wipe down a Christmas tree?) affect my faith, instead of my faith determining how I react and respond to those events. That is an 'already' of my faith that I need to work on. And the key virtues here, enabling us to do that work, are humility and honesty.

But then there's my second question. What about the 'not yet' of my / your relationship with God, and of all the deep desires that I / you hold for the future? There are so many things that we long for, both in our journeys of faith and in our journeys through life, where 'not yet' seems to be, at best, the situation. All those things in our relationship with God of which we need to repent are also 'not yet's' of our journey of faith. But then there will be so many other 'not yet's' – healing for those we love, or for ourselves; relationships that are difficult or have gone sour; jobs or livelihoods which are poorly paid or uncertain or in chaos; and the bigger issues that I mentioned before like climate change and the pandemic. Where is God in all of these? John the Baptist said He was just coming, that He was just round the corner, indeed that He was already among them as one whom they did

not know. But how long O God? How long do we have to wait until the 'not yet's' of our faith and our lives become 'alreadies'?

These are key challenges to our faith, and Advent is a time for facing those, bringing them before God, waiting on Him for Him to fulfil in His good time, but also arguing them out with Him if needs be. And so the key virtues here are patience and faith – trust that the 'not yet's' will eventually be fulfilled.

But then there's another key challenge in relation to the 'not yet's' of our faith and our lives, which is that we might well be tempted to give up. The 'not yet's' haven't been and they won't be resolved and fulfilled, will they? The big promises of God, that He will make righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations, just won't happen, will they? They'll never happen. We might as well give up on God.

Well, let's consider again our two passages from today. Where is the 'never' in them? And the answer, of course, is that it isn't there. God promises, and the promises will be fulfilled. 'For nothing will be impossible with God' the angel says to Mary in another Advent reading. We may not see all the 'not yet's' of our journeys of faith and lives fulfilled this side of the grave. But they will be fulfilled. There is no 'never' with God. And the key virtue here is hope – keep alive the hope that God will fulfil all He has promised in our lives and the life of the world.

I want to finish with a story that I think illustrates all of this,¹ and which takes us back to the Second World War. Nagasaki was, of course, the second Japanese city to have an atomic bomb dropped on it in August 1945. It contained one of the largest Christian communities in the Orient. There is, apparently, a piece of grainy black-and-white film footage in the BBC archives, filmed at the Christmas after the bombing, Christmas 1945. A small congregation of survivors kneel in the cathedral ruins before a makeshift altar, their thin voices united in a Japanese version of 'Silent night'. Nothing could have stopped them celebrating midnight mass, not even an atomic bomb.

Their 'already' had been so fundamentally altered that it would have been understandable if they had given up on God – where was His steadfast love? Their 'not yet's' for some kind of normality to be restored, for salvation to come, would require enormous quantities of faith. And yet, in the face of such appalling circumstances, they continued to place their hope in God's future, and refused to believe that it would never come.

Our situations are almost certainly not as extreme as that by any stretch of the imagination, but we too have work to do in what is left of this Advent season in relation to the already, and the not yet, but not the never.

Amen

¹ Angela Tilby in the *Church Times*, 4 December 2020.