

THE FULNESS OF TIME¹

Isaiah 7. 10-16

Romans 1. 1-7

Matthew 1. 18-25

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The season of Advent, which we have been observing over the last several weeks, continues for a few more days still. Our last few weeks of worship have been marked by a clear tone of anticipation: a waiting for the second coming of the Lord on the last day, and the return of Christ in glory. The Scripture readings for the first three Sundays of Advent have all had a focus on the future.

It is only with this, the fourth and last Sunday of Advent, that our Scripture readings turn to that first Christmas itself, to the event of the Nativity more than two thousand years ago. As our gospel reading from St Matthew tells us, Mary ‘bore a son’ and he was named Jesus. It is only today, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, that we begin to look *backward* in time, instead of only forward. For several weeks we have lived in the present and looked forward to the future; and now, in these last few days before Christmas, we look to the past.

I must confess that all of this can get a bit confusing. We are used to hearing that the season of Advent is a period of *waiting*, and that makes an intuitive sense: yes, it is waiting—for Christmas. And that is absolutely true. During Advent we wait and prepare for the Christmas Day that is coming soon, and we also put ourselves in the imaginative place of people over two thousand years ago who were waiting for the coming of the Messiah, as Isaiah had prophesied.

¹ A reference to Gal 4. 4-7.

So you can see why it gets confusing. During Advent, all at once and at the same time, we are trying to talk about memories of the ancient past (a Hebrew prophet called Isaiah; a family in Bethlehem); the concrete demands of the present day; and the cosmic future that awaits us. They are all spoken of, at one and the same time, which is right now. Past, present, and future are joined together here in our midst.

It can even be a little disorienting, this looking *forward* and *backward* at the same time. But that is as it should be, because this very chronological ambivalence and ambiguity is part of the story of the Christ child himself. That is because one of the things that it means for God to become a human being in Jesus Christ is that the God who exists *outside of time* physically joined us, we human creatures, to live *within time*. This is one of the things that the term ‘the Word made flesh’ means: God’s physical entrance into time as well as space, in order to be with his people.

So far, so good. But as you and I know, to be part of time, as we are, is necessarily to be limited by it. We do not only live *within time*, it governs our lives. We are subject to it, and our subjection to time is inevitably tied up somehow with loss. ‘Had we but World enough and Time’, wrote the seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell to his beloved mistress: but we don’t. In a finite world, there is neither world enough, nor time enough. In this world of not enough time, there are therefore tears; and there is loss.

It is the radical claim of the Church that on Christmas Day, in a backwater town of the Roman Empire, the eternal God entered into that place of loss. On Christmas Day, the eternal King of kings put himself under the subjection of the passage of time.

This may sound hopelessly abstract, and the kind of thing that is best left to dusty seminar rooms and boozy pubs at universities, but the real-life consequences of this

statement are enormous. Everyone knows that in order to be able to tell a story, a movement of time is required: one thing happens, and then another thing happens, and so on. There are beginnings, and middles; and, yes, there are ends.

God's entrance *into time* means that a story can be told about *him and us*, a common story in which we play a part, a story in which we have a personal relationship with the eternal God through his incarnate son, Jesus Christ. With this birth of a son to Mary, the *timeless enters time*. The infinite takes on finiteness. The inaccessible becomes accessible. The invulnerable becomes vulnerable. Jesus of Nazareth becomes Emmanuel: God with us.

So if we ever feel far away from God, we can take heart. As Advent draws to a close, we see not our ascent to God, but God's willingness to descend to us. As Advent draws to a close, we see, at every celebration of the Holy Eucharist, God's drawing close to us in Word and Sacrament, being present with us even in his absence. During Advent, we see how God Incarnate will be this story's end: that is, he will join us, in the flesh, again. This reconciliation with God through Christ is the common story that links together every human being and is a part of every human life; and this incarnation is expressive of the divine love that is the very being of God.

But of course, this expression of divine love comes at a cost—a great cost—to him. And this is the minor key that sounds within our jubilant Christmas celebration: for God to freely choose to enter the world is for God to freely choose to become vulnerable to a world of sin. And thus the child born in love would become the man killed by hate and indifference. For him to be subject to the passage of time required accepting limits and finiteness, vulnerability and death.

But for this incarnate Jesus, these limitations would not be the final word. Being vulnerable to death, he would confront it, accept it, and destroy it. In his death and

resurrection, in his ascension and mediation, he enables mortality to take on immortality; he enables finiteness to pass into infinity; he enables humanity to be transfigured into divinity; he enables creator and creature to meet, one day, face to face.

This week we will tell the story of the birth of the incarnate Christ, and we will relate the *story* of our relationship with the one who was, and who is, and who is to come, again. The Alpha and the Omega. The beginning, the middle, and the end.

Amen.