

Liturgical Season of Advent/Christmas – Cycle B – December 2017

Introduction: Time as Advent, as Adventure

Time was defined for me in our college philosophy class as the measure of motion – meaning, for example, a way of clocking the movement of the earth’s spin in front of the sun, concluding with a complete spin equaling what we called 24 hours or 1440 minutes – information useful for controlling nature, planning one’s day or week or month; a measure to be conveniently divided into longer periods of years and centuries of seemingly aimless planetary motion.

But to a philosopher, for example Martin Heidegger, Time is more than clock time; it’s not just a measure of physical motion. Time is, let’s say, the conveyor belt of events, moments of grace, discovery, eureka experiences, events fit for only or often mythological expression – those moments when suddenly or gradually an awakening takes place. Time is the carrier of new BEING, *fresh* BEING if we stay open to its arrival, day by day.

As William Richardson, the Jesuit authority on Heidegger and a friend as well, expresses it under the heading of *Being as Ad-vent*: . . . *Being is to be understood as advancing toward the poet . . . it is not a mere entity that simply endures but a coming that is always new, always original.*

We ARE, we want to BE – meaning BE in the fullest, deepest sense of BEING, BEING ALIVE – we don’t just want to drift through life, allowing time to pass like the landscape outside the window of a speeding train. We want to pause or be stopped as it were – to savor, to receive the moment, to BE in ever-wider dimensions of BEING, of Experience. Or to put it another way we want to Live – not just exist – we even suffer a thirst that will not let us rest, a thirst for everlasting BEING.

And so BEING is not something static of which we have fleeting possession. BEING is always coming toward us as it were in new impulses; within our reach, our embrace – in events, in moments of insight, incidents unforeseen, unexpected, from out of space, around the bend, works of art, music. We are in a constant state or condition of Advent – of something arriving tomorrow or next week or even arriving out of our forgotten past (it catches up with us), if we are not completely stalled in clock time, in habit, in what has been objectified, defined, a finished fact, recorded and stored on some

library shelf, dead letters (which in my opinion is what the Bible has become for fundamentalists, literalists).

We live in a continual Advent, a continual Adventure, an expectation of more BEING, becoming More – as Jesus says in John’s Gospel, amid the unexplored space in between the objects, the sanctuaries of our world . . . the space into which Job was swept when God snapped him out of the logic of his closed, argumentative, juridical world and took him on a cosmic tour that shut him up, left him in a state of wonder, a fresh beginning, needing to learn how to talk all over again.

Time as Institutionalized

But we *do* get stuck in Time when we institutionalize it, codify it, fixate it. When we are *ensnared* by our history, our myths of nationalism, of scientism – when we seek a measurable finality to be sure of ourselves, no longer at the mercy of an uncharted future, of mystery – but always settled, comfortable, self-justified, knowing what’s what.

I use the word *institutionalize* to describe what could be a resistance to Time’s Advent, to tomorrow; a decision to apply the brake to Time as Advent, arrival, to build, for example, border walls, to create absolute sanctuaries. Etymologically the word to institute is traceable to the Latin word *statuere*: to make something stand (like a statue) or let’s say, to take a stand. We institute when we establish laws and customs that are intended to become more or less final – like a constitution, a code of law. Society is expected to operate within the limits of such a playing field – three bases and home, outfield, definitions of what’s foul and what’s fair, umpires. It makes living viable, also playable, but also, given human nature, enforced, potentially closed – closed even as the metaphor I use was once upon a time closed to people of a different skin color like Jackie Robinson. No changes please.

One school of thought holds that our American Constitution should be read, interpreted as originally intended by its framers. Another says diversity is inherent between its origin; changes in modern life may allow articulations that might surprise the framers. We actually call places of confinement institutions.

Religion

Religion becomes institutionalized. How many fixations or dogmas divide the Orthodox from our Catholic institution? For fifteen centuries Catholics

have included in their Creed belief in *the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son*. The Orthodox argue the expression reduces the Father's role in the Trinity and refuse to include this filioque. No change is foreseen, no unity enjoyed.

Rubrics become fixations. I anoint a burnt child in a hospital, applying the holy oil to his hands. Was it the top of his hands or his palms? I forgot. (This is back in 1955; I was just ordained.) The rule said to anoint a lay-person's *palms*; you only anointed the *back* of the hands of a dying priest. If I anointed the back of the boy's hands, was what I did valid? Will he make it to heaven because of my lapse of attention? Paralysis, consult some authority before it's too late! Redo the anointing!

The day comes in the sixties when the altar is ripped out of the chapel wall and Mass begins to be celebrated facing the friars attending. Then, when I'm assigned the community Mass I'm influenced by changing Times to deliver a three-minute comment on the Gospel. Breaking up the routine the way the Vatican Council broke up the chapel's architecture. It's a problem of time – the superior wants no delay in having the friars get to the refectory for breakfast *on clock time* despite the fact that Real Time, The Event of the Council, has reoriented the whole liturgy. I'm relieved of saying the community Mass. Past time, fixated time continues to rule even as Time as the Advent of deeper, wider BEING by way of Vatican II intrudes on what HAS BEEN.

Latin, the language of theology and philosophy down through Church history. Manuals in Latin, lectures in Latin. All encyclicals promulgated in an official Latin original. Doesn't matter if much important doctrine is missed by the student or worse incorrectly understood. Doesn't matter if the inhibition to speak in Latin undercuts any questions, class discussion that might clarify so much.

The Mass in Latin. How many priests in the Dark Ages were even able to pronounce the prayers in Latin? Altar boys reciting syllables, not words, just making the right sounds. A dead language, therefore safe. The intrusion of Time, of the vernacular, might corrupt rather than clarify serious teaching. Did someone dare translate the Bible from its approved Latin (Vulgate) translation into English, German? Should people be exposed to the lustiness of the Song of Songs?

To me a classic example of rigid institutionalization can be found in Luke's Gospel where the Sadducees, who didn't believe in an afterlife, present Jesus with a case in which a brother dies without a son and the levirate law kicks in that requires another brother to marry the widow and beget a son to the deceased brother. In this case, one brother after another to the number of six carry out this obligation and fail to produce a proxy son to the first. How will that hold up in the hereafter? Whose wife will she be? Jesus says in effect, "You are trying to transfer an institution of this world, of clock time to a totally other realm; it doesn't fit; a fuller understanding of relationship takes place there." The same could be said of our institutions of reward and punishment. We impose them on the hereafter, on a realm where grace is the rule – they falsify life after death.

There is so much more that became frozen in time, swallowed in time until Time as grace even *within* our life time arrived as a Eucharist, an Advent, an Arrival, a Birth already into the hereafter as we may experience it again this December.

Translating the Advent of Time into Story, Song.

How do we translate this arrival of quality time, Time as event, as grace, as something so much more than clock time – as revelation, an unveiling of our ultimate destiny day by day? We translate it into a story, moment after moment into story after story. We translate it into drama, parables, salvation history that doesn't limit itself to the past but presents us with a tomorrow of similar discoveries, like Mary's encounter with an angel. That's why we repeat such stories, sing such songs.

*O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight*

For one example – the Exodus

We do what the Bible (among other great stories) does: we take a happening in Time, a moment of escape from slavery, from the grip of an Egyptian empire whose permanence was expressed in the massive stone monuments

of its pharaohs, and not only do we describe the moment with all the license of a drama but also project it into a trek, a prophecy toward the future Exoduses that continue to unfold.

When Israel was in Egypt land. Let my people go! Oppressed so hard they could not stand. Let my people go! So the God sayeth: 'Go down, Moses. Way down in Egypt land Tell all pharaohs 'Let my people go.'

The Exodus, the whole Bible is such a translation of one Advent moment after another – the arrival of God, of vision, of material and temporal reality as something holy. What is the Bible but the translation of Time's Advents into adventures in the language of poetry, of story, even festival, mime.

Jacob Marley

Dickens does the same thing in the 19th century in his Christmas Carol. How does he describe Ebenezer Scrooge? *Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster . . . External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather could chill him . . . The heaviest rain, and snow, and hail, and sleet, could boast of the advantage over him in only one respect. They often "came down" handsomely, and Scrooge never did.*

Scrooge is trapped in the greedy environment of his time, his commercial tradition. True he is on the verge of Christmas Past, Present and Future performing their Advent, their arrival upon his consciousness – to successfully draw him out into the wider, generous festival time of Christmas – but the arrival of his Advent experience begins with the arrival of Marley's Ghost upon his closed and cold environment. Listen to how Marley is described, the arrival of an event as revelation: *The cellar door flew open with booming sound, and then he heard the noise much louder, on the floors below; then coming up the stairs; then coming straight toward his door . . . His colour changed . . . , without a pause, it came on through the heavy door [even though locked?] and passed into the room before his eyes. [It was Marley's ghost.] The chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was long, and wound about him like a tail; and it was made . . . of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel.*

Toward the end of this visit, upon Scrooge's noting how fettered Marley was, Marley replies: *I wear a chain I forged in life. I made it link by link, and yard by yard, [he could have added year by year] I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is the pattern strange to you?*

Scrooge is finally impressed and told that Time as grace, as revelation will follow Marley as experiences of Christmas Past, Present and Future until Scrooge "wakes up" wide open to the sunshine of Christmas Day. His mood when that day dawns? *I don't know what to do! . . . I am as light as a feather [relieved of the burden of static time], I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy (reborn). I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody! A happy New Year to all the world!*

The Advent/Christmas Readings

The first readings of Advent are taken from the later chapters of the prophet Isaiah, from chapters 40 to 63, all composed *just before* the Jews were released by the Persians from their Babylonian Exile, *or soon after*, upon their return to a ruined city, no more temple, no more royal dynasty, riddled institutions and controversies over who still owned what. So it was a time of stress but of hope of a new Advent, of Time as a series of events that would change the nation into Judaism, a Church, rather than the political state it had been.

You can hear the anguish that makes the poet plead for a new Exodus. And it becomes our prayer as well. Why let us wander from your paths, leave us with ever hardened hearts, watching the same old news day after day? Tear through the zodiac – that belt of animal constellations, the Ram, the Bull, the Crab, the Lion, the Scorpion, the Goat, the Fish and so on, within which our Sun forever travels, the universe of old TV remakes, reruns, political campaigns, the everyday news from which we seem never to escape. Rend the heavens, shake things up as of old. Lay down a highway out of tomorrow (*tomorrow, tomorrow, I love ya, tomorrow*).

Bulldoze your way into our lives, level the high places we build to withstand your arrival, fill up the valleys, the empty places of our minds, our souls, get rid of the speed bumps, unveil your radiance. We have become like dry grass, we wither even as flowers wilt, we are so easily blown away – like

withered leaves. *But I miss you most of all . . . When autumn leaves start to fall.*

You have been forgotten, nobody knows or cares about you anymore, your face is hidden, even art seems to produce only disfigurement – yet we remain clay ready to be fashioned by your hand.

But here it comes – the Advent moment is emerging, good news. Like a shepherd he feeds his flock, gathers us into his arms, his bosom – tender toward the ewes. Proclaim liberty to the broken hearted, to all imprisoned within so much scary nonsense. Clothe us with new personalities – a diadem upon each head, a robe of justice, jewels, bring out our lustre – even as the earth sprouts gardens, so will the arrival of a quality Time, a New Covenant make us sprout before all the world.

And now the Gospel readings: This figure called Jesus emerges out of nowhere (Nazareth) and tells us to wake up, be alert. Someone is coming in due time – and it's not Santa Claus. It's like a man who has been traveling abroad but orders his gatekeeper to keep watch – be ready for the Time, that moment whenever he comes, day or night, at any moment, at every moment. Watch. Or even when you are not watching, not awake, not alert and then a professor wakes you up and tells you to start working, get off your ass, get serious about your life – and there he is! From that moment on!

Or another fellow, John the Baptist from out of the past but now from out of tomorrow, claiming to be a messenger of Real Time, Real BEING, a voice crying out of the seeming desert, the seeming emptiness before us. Immerse yourself in the water, a Red Sea crossing all over again to reach the shore of a truly promising tomorrow, a figure testifying to a light to guide us out of the darkness of our thoughts, our world.

And suddenly by the fourth Sunday of Advent where do we find ourselves? In an ancient place, the chamber of a virginal being capable of receiving God; but now a present place – where she (and we), full of grace, greet an angel out of true Time. The Holy Spirit, not the secular spirit, will overshadow her, generate a new humanity, a child bearing and radiating the graciousness of true God, or a meaningful future, a brighter universe.

Advancing into Christmas Day

Tomorrow becomes Today. The birth of a light that cannot be quenched by any of our perversity. The people who walked in darkness has seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom, a light has shone . . . they rejoice as at a harvest . . . for the yoke that burdened them, the rod of the taskmaster you have smashed, battles cease, for a child is born to us, I am a child again but of a maturity that is ancient, eternal – a Prince of Peace. No longer feeling forsaken. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet bearing this good news, saying to Zion and to us, Your God is King. The ruins of Jerusalem break into song. Sing to the Lord a new song, a new way of singing, of behaving that in itself is a song, a poem. As when I first saw Assisi, the city of St. Francis, upon a hill – retaining still the lingering radiance, the presence of a holy event, of something holy.

Nature itself joins in. This season is not like any other season, it's not just a winter solstice, a commercial opportunity to cash in. It's a return to a beginning, a restart of Time, Creation, if you will. The beginning of Life, a Life that was and is the light of the human race, the light that shines in the darkness nor can darkness overcome it – the true light, real light which enlightens everyone. To those who accept it he gives the power to be God's children beyond whatever other genealogy they pursue, beyond what Ancestry can come up with. And the Word became flesh, became contagious, and made his dwelling among us – not just in a geographical location in the Middle East – but *within* each of us so that his radiance may shine through us – full of grace and reality, our days, our years becoming Time as grace, each of us an Advent to others.