

Reflection for December 2021

Theme: Advent

Once upon a time there was a boy who had a dog. The boy and the dog loved each other and played happily as dear friends. But one day the dog did something the boy's parents didn't like. To appease his parents, the boy had to send the dog away. Years passed, and the boy forgot there had ever been a dog. But inside him there was still a place where something was missing. When he was a man, the missing place called him so strongly that he had to go in search of what he needed. His search brought him to the edge of a forest.

Not knowing why, he found himself sitting, waiting. Slowly, gradually, two burning eyes appeared in the darkness of the forest. The young man waited. Slowly, gradually, a long pointed nose emerged. The young man waited. Finally, out of the forest, slinking, there came an animal: thin, scarred, muddy, matted with burrs. You would hardly know it had ever been a dog.

The young man greeted it softly: Hello. The ugly dog stopped, untrusting. The young man felt in his body the memory stirring of the good and happy times with his friend. He said to the animal before him: I want to know how it has been for you, all these years in exile. And in his own way the dog told him, this, and this. Sad, lonely, scared, bitter. The young man told the dog that he had heard it. He heard all that he had gone through.

And with this hearing, the dog visibly softened, became warmer and more trusting. After some time, it came close enough to be touched. When the young man touched the dog, he could feel the missing place inside him begin to fill in. And soon after he took the dog home, and gave it a bath and a warm place by the fire – after it felt loved again – it was no longer ugly. It was beautiful.

There is something about these two lost friends – the boy and the dog, something in both of them, that we can all relate to. Like the little boy, we carry within us a longing, a gnawing so strong yet so strange that we don't quite 'remember' what is missing in our lives- Some of us look for it in the glitters of Life and quench it for a while, only to discover those were empty promises and the longing has only grown stronger. Some of us try to satisfy it in the finding of a partner and in parenthood and then one day when the children have moved out and the house is empty, the familiar longing creeps back in... but then there are also some of us who know that there is only One who can satisfy that longing- we knew it the day we left home and hearth to give our lives to Him- perhaps it was only a faint Voice we heard, a flickering hope we had, or sometimes a drive so strong that it couldn't be quenched until we gave our 'Yes' to him.

There is also a part of us that is like that dog- that feels forgotten by our Master, until we cannot recognise Him or ourselves- for we are more like beasts now and have forgotten how loved we are. Sometimes finding that Great Love is like coming out of the forests, out of the ugliness within and without, only to discover how beautiful we are when we recognise His Love.

And like both- the boy and the dog, we wait... for that union which will make all things new.

That waiting for the boy to leave his home and come to the forest, or to take the story further if we may dare, to *become* a dog, only to remind his own dog that he is loved- that waiting is what God made a reality. That waiting is Advent.

The season of Advent is one of the most beautiful seasons in the church's Calendar. It is a season of waiting and waiting expectedly. The word 'Advent' is derived from the Latin word meaning "the coming," the coming of Our Lord. And, fun fact, Advent doesn't begin on the same day each year. The first Sunday of Advent is always the Sunday that falls closest to the Feast of St. Andrew on November 30th. The Advent season always has four Sundays leading up to Christmas Day. The liturgical colour of Advent is purple, the colour of the bruised heart. It's even sometimes called a 'little Lent' because like the liturgical season before Easter, Advent is a time of preparation and expectation. Just as there can be no real celebration of the Resurrection without experiencing the sorrow of Good Friday, there can be no real celebration of Christmas without the expectation of Advent.

When you look at the Liturgical readings of this season, they are crackling with energy and excitement. They are revolutionary and we see the revolutionary message they're meant to convey when we look at the readings of the prophet Isaiah which is used throughout Advent. The context of the Isaiahian readings is helpful. In the year 587 BC the Babylonians raided and utterly destroyed the city of Jerusalem and burned the Temple. The Temple was the central point of the Jewish life and liturgy. It was the throne of Yahweh, it was His Home on earth. Not just that the best and the brightest of the Jews were deported by the Babylonians. The question that haunted the Jews was – How could God's dwelling be destroyed? Had God abandoned his people? However, the exile did end some 70 years later and the first batch of exiles started to return. The Isaiah readings are taken from this Babylonian return period. However, this newfound freedom was short lived, the Jews are now subdued by the Greeks and then the Romans. It seems there was no hope; the cry of the people was – *How long O Lord, how long?*

A message of Paradox

Fast forward to some 500 years later, and the Gospels introduce us to a couple who are desperately hunting for a place to birth their baby. And a place, find they did, in a dirty stable with just the mute animals for company. Emperor Caesar was the embodiment of power, and to contrast was the babe born in the manger, vulnerable and helpless. Caesar was the most well protected, and here was the babe with nothing to protect him but some swaddling clothes. Caesar had the comfort which was beyond words and here the Bread of Life became a babe and laid in a manger – a feeding trough! So unlikely and insignificant that one is bound to miss his arrival. That precisely is the message of Advent to find the King in the most unlikely of places for no place is without significance. For this is what God delights in - to hide, until the eyes of the curious innocence find him!

A closer look at the manger and things look a little different. Caesar probably ate the best that anyone could, but the babe came to be the Bread that is life and would satisfy us. His entourage was not horses and cavalymen but the angel armies – the heavenly host. Caesar would annihilate his enemies but he would teach us 'to love

even those who hate you'. Caesar could silence his enemies but he would silence the elements of nature – the wind and waves. Caesar had the title 'Son of God' but the title was name proper for the babe born. Caesar would die but he would rise from the dead, Caesar will cease but he will endure forever. Here is the paradox of the season, for reason and sight can lead us only so far, for *'if Mary were filled with reason, there would be no room for the child'*.

When we look at our own lives through this Advent lens, we will find this paradox ever so real. Perhaps we have been through long periods of sickness, when God seemed absent, only to discover years later, when we are well again, that God was present then more than ever. Or when we found ourselves in a remote location, with little or no connectivity, with no one to call a friend or companion that God guided us and held us more closely than we thought.

Have there been times in your life when God seemed absent and you later discovered that God was perhaps more present then than ever before?

A waiting- with hope

The idea of waiting is never quite a pleasing one. Think of the waiting line outside a doctor's clinic when you are burning with fever, or when an examination date gets postponed indefinitely, or worse, when court hearings keep getting pushed forward while an innocent man languishes in jail. Waiting, especially an indefinite one, is always painful.

Existentialist playwright, Samuel Beckett plays on this angst of waiting indefinitely in his Absurdist drama, *Waiting for Godot*, where Godot is a mysterious, tyrannical Master (meant to signify God) who promises his servants he will come, but never shows up!

But God is not Godot and waiting for God is not uncertain for as Hosea reminds us *"his appearance is as sure as the dawn"* (6:3) and nor can we tire of waiting because unlike all other kinds of waiting there is a *renewal of strength* in our waiting for God (Is 40 :31). This waiting will never leave us empty or disappointed as the Psalmist says, *"I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope."* (Ps 130:5)

The Three Advents

So while Advent is a remembrance of the world waiting for a Saviour, it isn't just about the past. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in an Advent homily, described the reality of not only one, but three Advents. The first Advent is the Incarnation occurring on a particular day in history in the town of Bethlehem when Jesus was born. The second Advent is the unseen spiritual presence of Christ dwelling in our hearts today. St. Charles Borromeo, an Italian cardinal and leading figure in the Counter-Reformation wrote this about the season of Advent, *"Each year, as the Church*

recalls this mystery, she urges us to renew the memory of the great love God has shown us. This holy season teaches us that Christ's coming was not only for the benefit of his contemporaries; his power has still to be communicated to us all...The Church asks us to understand that Christ, who came once in the flesh, is prepared to come again. When we remove all obstacles to his presence he will come, at any hour and moment, to dwell spiritually in our hearts, bringing with him the riches of his grace." So while Advent is a remembrance of the world waiting for a Savior, it isn't just about the past.

Pope Benedict XVI expands on this concept of Advent transcending a historical event in the past. He explains: *The first thing we have to accept is, ever and again, the reality of an enduring Advent. If we do that, we shall begin to realize that the borderline between 'before Christ' and 'after Christ' does not run through historical time, in an outward sense, and cannot be drawn on any map; it runs through our own hearts. Insofar as we are living on a basis of selfishness, of egoism, then even today we are 'before Christ'.*

What does the idea of an 'enduring Advent mean to us? Are there any areas of our life that we still seem to be living as if 'before Christ'? How may we change this?

The third Advent is in the future when Christ comes again in glory. So, Advent is a time to contemplate the Incarnation, but it's also a time to consider the implications of that Incarnation for our spiritual lives and to prepare ourselves for the second coming.

The Advent season offers us the opportunity to cultivate an Advent spirit, a spirit of openness to the love of God that prepares us for the joy of Christmas Day. And no one can be a better guide for us than Mother Mary. Mary's life is the model for every Christian no matter their vocation or station in life because every Christian is called to follow her example in being a Christ-bearer. We're invited to make Jesus Christ Incarnate, to give him flesh, through our loving faithfulness to God. And to follow in Mary's footsteps, to carry Christ into the world, requires an Advent time of spiritual growth. During Advent we wait for God to make himself known in us.

Questions for Reflection:

- *Recall / Relate instances from your life when you have had to wait for something. Was it worth the wait?*
- *Have you waited on the Lord for something? How did it pan out?*