

Jesus Comes to Disrupt and to Liberate

A sermon for Advent Sunday by the Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell, 27 November 2022

Biblical Texts: Isaiah 2: 1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13: 9-14; Matthew 24: 36-44

Well, Advent's here, and Christmas is coming! More particularly, for we Christians, Jesus is coming—coming as ever to disrupt and to liberate. What a strange message this at a moment when humanity seems paralysed, faced by newly apocalyptic global threats yet fixated on maintaining business as usual. The American Baptist theologian Barry Harvey gives a good picture of what this is like, in his book on how to be the Church in postmodern times, and I quote:

The irony is deep, pervasive, and seemingly all-encompassing. In virtually every corner of the globe human beings spin round and round, living out their lives as individuals paradoxically compelled in their “private” lives to make choices from a range of options that are enumerated and managed by institutions they cannot see and people they never meet face-to-face. ... The groove of the City is decisive, making its inhabitants believe that they can do what they want and get away with it. A peculiar mix of permissiveness and supervision thus characterizes the comings and goings of the global Cosmopolis, as people do exactly what it wants them to do, yet all the while saying to themselves that they are free.¹

So says Barry Harvey.

Now, in direct opposition to this comfortably settled yet actually quite uneasy and dysfunctional state of affairs, Jesus comes to make all things new, which includes making all things different.

This certainly doesn't mean, as Matthew's Gospel supposes, that Jesus was returning any day with those first Christians needing to be ready. And despite plagues, famines and wars throughout history, which have set apocalyptic hares running, that return hasn't happened yet and is no longer anticipated. Nowadays, in light of the nuclear threat now returning, and the possibility of unknown catastrophic tipping points for our world system thanks to worsening climate change, we realise that the apocalypse is now in our hands, with lessons to be drawn

¹ Barry A. Harvey, *Another City: An Ecclesiological Primer for a Post-Christian World* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1999), p. 2.

for humanity in general from today's gospel. One of which is that while we can be sure that there's a threat, we can't be sure about the details or the timing.

In light of all that I want to look more closely at today's readings in the context of this Advent Eucharist. Because the Jesus who comes in word and imagination also comes in bread and wine, and as ever his coming means disruption and liberation—disruption of the settled status quo in our world, offering liberation from all that threatens and poisons God's beloved human family.

First, to today's gospel, with Matthew's Jesus promising disruption of our society, culture, economy and security. In other words, we're facing a complete game-changer. The social life of eating and drinking, of marriage, of home and family, will be disrupted. The economic life of an agrarian society will be disrupted—farming, milling and its workforce. And with that the security of uncontested ownership will prove ineffective—behind locked doors, not to mention behind borders and walls. God in Christ is staging a world-historical break in, and we're being put on notice.

Yet it's not a break in that has to be read in terms of violence and disaster. Our Isaiah reading today talks about God's coming as good news of peace, with swords beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. Reading this I was reminded of a Catholic church I visited outside Vienna where the baptismal font had been made out of a great big World War II artillery shell—I hope that all those who gathered around that former explosive weapon for baptisms felt a frisson of risk at the prospect of lives being given over to Jesus Christ, to his mission of disruption and liberation.

Likewise, today's psalm blends together the judgement theme and the peace theme—the peace of Jerusalem, of God at home with God's people, which is God's truest and most unsparing judgement on a violent world. God judges a violent world by bringing peace, with violent nations and violent people having to face the truth at last about how wrong and how deluded they were—Deeply Wailing, as Wesley's Advent hymn puts it, Deeply Wailing, as they see the true messiah, with their folly exposed for all to see, and with God's different agenda for humanity revealed. This is an apocalypse indeed, but one that we see most clearly

in that unlikely stable at Bethlehem, and under a silent sky on Good Friday, until its full revealing in God's great apocalypse of peace over violence and death that Easter brings.

Now, this break in from God, this disruption and liberation in Jesus Christ, means conversion—initial conversion for some, and ongoing conversion for all of us, which is the business of word and sacrament in shaping lives that are open and attentive to God. Today's Romans reading has a famous story of conversion attached to it, which we can read at the end of Book VIII in Augustine's *Confessions*.

The spiritual ground had been well prepared for Augustine, who was at his wits' end in a personal crisis, but the break-in, the breakthrough of faith in Jesus Christ, had not yet come. Then he heard the sing-song voice of a child from a nearby house, "Take it and read, take it and read." Augustine was struck by how strange and unlikely this was, and I'll let him tell you what happened next, after he heard that child's call, with its enormous consequences for the Church and for the whole Western World.

I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall. For I had heard the story of [St] Antony, and I remembered how he had happened to go into a church while the Gospel was being read and had taken it as a counsel addressed to himself when he heard the words *Go home and sell all that belongs to you. Give it to the poor; and so the treasure you have shall be in heaven; then come back and follow me* (Matt 19:21). By this divine pronouncement he had at once been converted to you.

So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting, for when I stood up to move away I had put down the book containing Paul's Epistles. I seized it and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: *not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites* (Rom 13:13, 14). I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and the darkness of doubt was dispelled.²

You'll recognise the climactic verses of today's epistle as the ones that bring the breakthrough for Augustine, but you might have also noticed that Augustine was already looking to scripture

² Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII.12., trans R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), pp. 177-78.

for guidance, and that his desires were already being drawn by the saints, as in the story of Anthony's conversion. So, when Paul warns about gratifying the desires of the flesh—that is, the typical desires of our human nature—Augustine was already having his desires shaped in a different direction. And so are we, gathered here among the communion of saints, in an atmosphere thick with scripture, where the Eucharist serves to transform and reorient our desires week by week, Advent by Advent, year by year. This means nothing less than putting on the Lord Jesus Christ, as Paul says, until at last we begin to think like him, to act like him, indeed to look like him—to make him present for others.

So, friends, the Advent break in of God in Christ is underway, bringing disruption and liberation—disruption of a status quo that our world needs to be free of, and liberation from the imprisonment of sin, from being trapped in the disordered desires of others while crowing about our freedom and originality. René Girard, who you may have heard of, was right onto all of this, along with the break in that Jesus represents. Which is no less than a different way of doing the world—of marriage and family, of economic relations, of what security means, of peace as God's judgement on war-soaked human history, and with that personal conversion, putting on the Lord Jesus Christ, which is the promise and challenge of baptism and Eucharist.