

ADVENT MYSTERY

The Scroll of the Prophet Zephaniah 3:16
“I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your (very) eyes, says the LORD.”



Like many young people my age, I abandoned the Church during my adolescence and found my own way in life. I grew my hair long, let my clothes get shabby, went around in public barefoot a lot, and spent long hours at night reading philosophy in college. I wandered aimlessly for a while, until one Sunday morning in the fall of 1973, when I inexplicably walked into a little Episcopal Church in Waco, Texas; St. Alban's. To this day I am not sure exactly what it was that drew me there that morning, but as soon as I entered the nave, I was spellbound. I knew that I was suddenly captured by a presence there, by the flickering of the sanctuary lamp amidst the quiet shadows about the altar, by the

smell of flowers and polished wood, and a hint of incense in the air, by the sound of hushed voices and whispered prayers. I seemed to recognize the place, though I had never been there before. It seemed to me so inviting, so familiar, like a place I once knew but had long since forgotten. It felt like home.

And I shall always remember that it was during the season of Advent that I rediscovered my place in the Church, a place to which I returned week after week that year to hear again and again those beautiful poetic images of Isaiah and the prophets. And I have often wondered since if the hymns and lessons of this season of Advent did not play a significant role in my coming back to the Church, and in my eventual call to the priesthood. For those readings and those melodies haunt me still. They speak so romantically about swords being beaten down into plowshares, and the wolf lying down with the lamb, and the shepherd leading the flock on level ground through deserts that suddenly burst forth with springs of water and blooming flowers. There is the shrill of that voice crying in the wilderness, and upon banks of the Jordan River, and there is that persistent rumor of one long-expected finally coming to dwell amongst his people. The words and the music of this season inspired me then, as they do now, to dream dreams, to see visions of a lost Paradise, imagining a place where there is no war, no death, neither sorrow or crying, but (only) the fullness of joy, a time when there shall be no

more tears in the eyes of children, but only peace on earth, and goodwill among mankind.

This is what the season of Advent is all about for me. It is a time of longing, and watching, and waiting. Advent, it seems to me, is perhaps the most normative of the Christian seasons. It is where most of us are most of the time; simply longing, and waiting, and watching for the Messiah, for the Anointed One to come, for God to make His Presence known to us again. We are, I think, as Christians, continually praying that thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, waiting for the Christ to be born among us again, longing to be saved and forgiven. It seems we all want and all need some kind of reassurance, some sign of hope, that this is not all there is in life; some acknowledgement of the mystery of those enchanted moments that have occurred in all of our lives when we have been confronted by a sense of Divine Presence, by the mysterious Other; moments when we have caught a glimpse of heaven or a sense of Paradise, moments when we have felt finally at home.

And so, we try as best as we can to replicate that feeling, that moment. So many of our religious traditions and our family customs around Christmas are simply vain attempts to do just that, to recapture the magic remembered in our lives and in our seasonal celebrations of the past. And though we so often fail in those attempts, we still affirm the reality of the mysterious Other, by boldly declaring that we have known it, we have

recognized it in our own lives. For me, Jesus is perhaps the clearest way to do just that. He is the strongest hint of another way of living, another kingdom somewhere, another way somehow. Jesus is the presence of that mystery Incarnate for many. And naturally then as Christians we want Jesus to be with us again, to come dwell among us, to herald for us the long-awaited Kingdom of God.

Humanity, it seems to me, has an inherent need and longing for this dream. It is reflected in so much of our poetry and art, in our great myths and novels. And it produces in us a kind of nostalgia for a world without the serpent, a world which we imagine ourselves to have once known, or now simply dream about, in which everyone and everything is intrinsically good and at peace, firmly and uncomplicatedly rooted in a happy and contented community or family. It is a kind of Camelot Christianity.

And the thing that seduces us about this idealization of a possible future, or some imagined past, is that it is partly genuine, it is partly true, and it does answer to something in us that all of us seem to long for. We have all caught glimpses of that mysterious presence at unexpected moments in our life, in sidelong glances as we pass by unsuspectingly. We have all discovered in ourselves at one time or another that hunger for a lost innocence, an innocence that will permanently lift us out of the emotional and psychological tangles of life that so enmesh us here. We do all seem to remember Eden. We know that place. And

God calls to us from there, and we hear the echo of God's distant voice again and again and again. And He calls us to that place to be with Him by heroic innocence and self-sacrifice, by purity of heart and unconditional love, and something within us answers that call, acknowledges its desirability, and even its inevitability. We sense that we are forever moving towards a threshold that we never quite seem to cross. We have an inexplicable sense of the accessible presence of the mystery of God which we cannot quite reach, but we firmly know is there, and we strain from the threshold towards it. It draws us by its insistent elusiveness towards a fulfillment that we know awaits us, if only we could take leave of ourselves; if only we could somehow unbuckle ourselves from the harness that restrains us here. But alas, we are tethered in all sorts of ways, and cannot seem to ever get quite free. Ah, but though we are never quite free, we know the magic of that presence. We know that it is drawing us nearer and nearer to fulfillment, and we are charmed by it.

There are times in all of our lives that this is especially so, when we long for a better world and redemption. For again and again we have all called out in the darkness of the night, in the silence of our rooms, in those quiet moments when we think that no one is looking, and again and again God answers us in some mysterious way. Like the ever-returning Christmas, we discover God's presence among us again and again, and we are briefly

reassured, and we recover from our momentary despair or suffering or hurt or confusion that had haunted us.

And then what happens? We drift back again to our present reality. Camelot cannot seem to go on forever, for the real world intrudes itself again. And so, the moment passes; the image vanishes. And sometimes then we begin to question and doubt whether it was even real or true. Until the next time we are suffering or hurt or confused or lonely, and then the cycle of redemption begins all over again and the reality of that mystery grasps us firmly once more. Like Advent, and Christmas, those moments come back to us again and again, year after year. And perhaps, just perhaps each year, the promise and the dream draw a little closer to fulfillment in us.

And so, I say

Ask every person if he's heard the story,
and tell it strong and clear if he has not
that once there was a fleeting glimpse of glory
called not Camelot, but (Jesus)
He is our once and future King. AMEN.