

**Advent I, Evening Prayer: Isaiah 2:10-end; John 3:1-21**  
**Meditation offered by Dr. Evan King**  
**Sunday, December 3, 2017**

*For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:17)*

The two lessons we have read this evening develop a relationship we can observe already in the Epistle and Gospel appointed for this morning, the first Sunday in Advent. In general, we can say that in Advent, our attention is being refocused and drawn toward the Nativity of our Lord in the weeks ahead. In other words, Advent is a season of preparation. Our lectionary gives us a specific structure through which we can approach this preparation. It puts before us Scriptural figures of God's judgement and God's mercy. If both of these aspects are thought and felt, if they are allowed to be truly transformative within us, then we are being drawn deeper, to find a unity behind both, and that unity is God's love. This structure is a kind of guidance, helping to prepare us to recognise Christ when he comes. Advent is the season which makes this the focus, but it is an anticipation not exclusive to these particular days and hours of our calendar year. The "when" of Christ's coming is not simply a particular historical moment; it is somehow always present to us in our hearts and minds.

In this morning's Gospel from Matthew, we heard of Christ's entry into Jerusalem and, specifically, his entry as its King. He is welcomed by those who recognise him as their King, the son of David. In ways which anticipate the Nativity, we see that our Lord's entry into the city, like his birth into this world, is clothed in humility. But, immediately, Jesus enters the Temple and casts out the lenders and money changers. The motion of God towards us in mercy and humility is also a purgation and a judgement. The Temple must not be a place of instrumental profit, where divine things have their worth only insofar as they can be made to serve our ends. The Temple must be redeemed and restored, as it is said, into a "house of prayer" (Mt. 21:13) – that is, into a place where God dwells and is honoured. Through the appointed Epistle for this morning, we find that this restoration applies directly to our present condition. As Paul writes to the Romans:

And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand; let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof. (Rm. 13:11-14)

Paul gives the impression that the moment we await is as near as it possibly could be. The day is at hand, so let us walk as in the day. From this perspective, the Gospel story of the entry into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the Temple is directed to the present. Christ must come to purge us of the rabble which keeps us from true prayer.

The same elements of divine judgement and mercy are heard in this evening's lessons. Here, too, we are given a sense of how near these are to us. Isaiah cries out that we must take shelter for fear at the Lord's coming. For all that is high shall be made low: the highest trees and mountains, every tower and vessel. The only option left to go is underground. As he says, "Enter

into the rock, and hide thee in the dust. [...] Go into the clefts of the rocks” (Is. 2:10, 21). As with the money-changers in the Temple, the Lord comes in judgement to bring down the lofty and high (Is. 2:17). Our proper response to the Lord’s coming and his judgement is humility, to hide ourselves in the cleft of the rock. In this we are not left without refuge. For one perhaps could say that this rock of shelter is Christ. If so, then the humble in Christ are the Temple cleansed, the “house of prayer”, in that for the humble and in the humble God alone is exalted.

Our second lesson this evening is from John’s Gospel. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, recognises Jesus as a great teacher who speaks and acts with a divine authority. Perhaps he would regard him as comparable to Elijah. But this does not go deeply enough – not deeply enough, of course, into the person of Christ or, for that matter, into his relation to us. In this regard, the character of Jesus’ reply takes on an added resonance in the context of Advent: “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3). In this context, his words suggest that it is not only his birth that we await; it is our rebirth, our regeneration in the Spirit, or, in other words, Christ’s birth within us. We hear also that this is the meaning or purpose of God’s coming in judgement: “God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” (Jn 3:17). The God who judges us, who levels the high places, who cleanses the Temple, is also the God who redeems us through the Spirit. Through our rebirth in the Spirit, we enter into Christ’s motion to and from the Father, and are made members of the kingdom of God, for “no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven” (Jn. 3:13). When Christmas Day comes, this is what we will pray in the Collect: “Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit”. Our lections for this morning and evening invite us to pray for this renewal even at the beginning of Advent.

For the past few months, a number of us have enjoyed a weekly reading group led by Dr. Wayne Hankey on Charles Williams’ *The Descent of the Dove*. The *Descent* resembles a history of Christianity, but Williams calls it a history of the Holy Spirit within the Church. As its dedication suggests, it is meant to serve a community in the practice of a Christian life. In the overall plan of the book, we observed two patterns. The first is a single arc of ascent and descent, from beginnings, to consummation and decline. However, the final chapter, “The Return of the Humanity” – which covers both Karl Marx and the Immaculate Conception! (*Descent*, 219) – is an exception to this pattern in that signals a new potentiality. In a sense, this final phase prepares the way for Charles Williams’ own standpoint, which is a kind of Christian socialism similar to what one finds in Dorothy Sayers. The second pattern in the book occurs within and between the individual stages. Here the movement is an internal oscillation. And so, to serve as a motto for the book, Williams provides the following contradiction, spoken in the intimate terms used by friends: “This also is Thou; neither is this Thou” (viii). These are words lovers understand – the lover who finds images of the beloved everywhere (“This *also* is Thou”) and nowhere (“*neither* is this Thou”). Williams refers to these as the two Ways: the way of Affirmation and the way of Negation. These two Ways are necessarily always present together, though in particular instances, in our lives and in history, one Way frequently predominates.

The maxim of the Affirmative Way is found in the Athanasian Creed, concerning the relation of the two natures in the person of Christ: “Not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God” (59, 235). The assumption of human nature and materiality into the Godhead is crucial for Williams. The image, the material, the human – all is elevated in its integrity; “all experience is to be gathered in”, he says (59), and nothing is left behind. Perhaps the loveliest pages in *The Descent of the Dove* concerning the Affirmative Way

are devoted to Dante and the figure of Beatrice in his work. As for the Negative Way, Williams finds its most radical expression in the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius. Every image and every affirmation is denied of God. Then even these denials must be denied in turn, in that they still imply some kind of limitation and determinacy. A helpful example which makes this a bit more concrete comes from John of the Cross, who advises us, “Speak disparagingly of thyself, and contrive that others may do so too”. John’s intent here, Williams notes, is not that we should slander our neighbour. Rather it aims at “the destruction of the image of oneself” (180).

How can these two Ways be held together, the integration of all experience and the destruction of one’s own image? Williams explicitly locates their union in the phrase of Ignatius of Antioch, bishop and martyr: “My Love is crucified” (59). This love is both Christ and one’s own “physical nature”. The unity of the two Ways is first in Christ’s Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension. This unity is in us through faith in him. To quote Williams:

The Eros [Love] that is crucified lives again and the Eros lives after a new style: this was the discovery of the operation of faith. The Eros of five hundred years of Greece and Rome was to live after a new style; unexpected as yet, the great Romantic vision approached. “My” Eros is crucified; incredible as yet, the great doctrines of interchange, of the City, approached. “Another is in me”; “your life and your death are in your neighbour”; “they in Me and I in them”. (46)

This life of Christ in us and our life in him brings before us what Williams calls the redeemed co-inherence, the life of reciprocity and exchange, forgiveness and pardon – and questions well beyond my capacities this evening.

Here at the beginning of Advent, we are invited to take a kind of Negative Way, to perceive the approach of this love as a judgement, with these images of the coming of day upon a dark landscape, the purging of the Temple, the levelling of mountains. This is to remind us that, though it comes, it will not be made to serve our own profit. But that same divine love, when it enters within us, becomes effectual and redemptive. May this motion be accomplished in us this Advent Season. And let us pray that when the Bridegroom comes, we may find ourselves like him. Amen.