

The Advent Procession at King's College, Cambridge

The service we now call the Advent Procession took place for the first time in 1934 and has been a significant feature of the College calendar ever since; so significant that we have it a week early when Term actually finishes before Advent Sunday. It used to be known as an Advent Carol Service, but was renamed a procession in the 1990s to draw attention that it was a service in which choir and clergy make their way around the whole building in a pattern choreographed by Eric Milner-White. I use the word 'choreographed' advisedly, as Maynard Keynes's wife, the ballerina Lydia Lopokova, famously said, 'now we know why the Dean loves ballet - he is the greatest choreographer of them all'. And while *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* has, through broadcasting, become the most famous service to take place here, it is not always the most moving or the most loved. As readers of Timothy Day's wonderful new book *I Saw Eternity the Other Night* know, Sylvia Plath wrote to her mother about it in deeply warm and appreciative words.

Last Sunday I shared the most magnificent experience with my friend Mallory, the Advent service at King's Chapel It was evening, and the tall chapel, with its cobweb lace of fan-vaulting, was lit with myriads of flickering candles, which made fantastic shadow play on the walls, carved with crowns and roses ... The organ pealed out and the hymn was that magnificent one, *Wachet auf* - Wake, O wake, with tidings thrilling - which was so beautifully familiar... Honestly, mother, I never have been so moved in my life.

Another contrast with *Nine Lessons and Carols* comes in the pattern of readings. In the Christmas Service we have a fairly settled pattern, beginning in the Garden of Eden and ending up with the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

There have been several sequences of readings at Advent and more variety among the readers. This year we start with the Senior Tutor and end up with the Chaplain - which is hardly the same as the Chorister to Provost progression - and also hear a reading by an undergraduate, a graduate, as well as a non-resident member and one of our College Research Associates.

Alongside the procession the most striking feature of the Advent service is that it begins in darkness. Darkness isn't such a novelty in this Chapel of course, and our

not-yet-completed experimentation with a lighting scheme perhaps reveals some of the practical difficulties involved in providing the sort of levels of illumination that people need and expect in today's brightly lit world. But candlelight has its place. Even if it's not great to read by, and leaves the Health and Safety officials with furrowed brows as they think of all the accidents that can happen in the semi-darkness and with naked flames, it is conducive to mystery, to spirituality and to the privacy that certain kinds of people like when they are, perhaps rather furtively, at prayer.

The greatness of our Advent Procession depends on many details all coming right, but also on the coherence and integration of all the aspects of the service. It's easy to engage with such serious beauty on a moment by moment basis, but it's also both pleasurable and valuable that there is a story, a narrative pattern, running through the service, and this is led by the readings.

With only six readings and no bidding to introduce the occasion the pace is brisk. The first lesson is a bleak passage from the writings of Job, a man of immense suffering who is so crushed by what life throws at him that he despairs (Job 23.1-10). This is what our Senior Tutor reads in the darkness. On hearing it you may think this is poor reward for taking the trouble to come along. There is no cheer in that lesson at all. And yet it may well resonate deeply with people who are more accustomed than they would wish to be with the feeling of despair.

The second lesson moves on a little from this. We are reading the Lamentations of the prophet Jeremiah now (Lamentations of Jeremiah 3.18-33). It is a tiny bit lighter in the building and while Jeremiah is no bundle of laughs he is not entirely overcome by gloom. 'It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassion fails not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I rejoice.' Life is hard, but Jeremiah knows God and rejoices.

The two lessons that follow are both from the letter of Paul to the Romans. (The first is Romans 8.18-25). Paul knew some dark times, of course. It was Paul who oversaw the stoning of Stephen the first martyr. It was Paul who, after he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, was stuck blind. He

recovered his sight, his senses, his dignity and, as one of the first and most influential Christians, took the good news of Jesus way beyond the Jewish community; a community of which he had been such a pompous and conceited leader.

'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed', he writes. And that's just his starting point. This is not a naive 'we will all live happily ever after' bromide, but a profound conviction that God in Christ can and will put everything to rights and bring us all to fulfilment and wholeness.

The second reading from Romans is from later on in the letter. Paul is giving instructions on how to live. 'Owe no one anything but to love one another' he preaches - as we preach here - 'for love is the fulfilling of the law'. And Paul is urgent. 'The night is far spent. The day is at hand. Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light'. This is very strong and very active. It's not 'sit back and let it all wash over us' religion. It's a call to invest all our actions with the attitude, effort and intention that can be appropriately described as love.

After this the pattern of readings takes a surprising turn. It is the annunciation to Mary - the angel Gabriel comes and gives astonishing news (Luke 1.26-38). A saviour, a Messiah, will come as the illegitimate child of a poor young girl. This is the beginning of the Christmas story and we could progress from this to the babe lying in the manger, the shepherds and wise men and all. But that's not where this goes at all.

Our final reading is from the gospel of Mark, the very opening, where he talks about John the Baptist - a prophet like Jeremiah; but whereas as Jeremiah found his way forward through tears of lamentation, John proclaims the way of the lord through the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1 1-8.)

And the people went out to the river Jordan to see this spectacle. Doubtless they began to wonder how on earth it might be that God could redeem his people through this frightening man and his eccentric practices. As they listened to his rantings they discovered that John proclaimed not himself but said, 'after me comes

one whose sandals I am not worthy to until... who will baptise you with the holy spirit.'

The journey from despair through faith, to hope, to baptism, is a long and powerful one. In it we start as victims, but we end up as renewed and invigorated agents. We start by worrying about what has happened to us; we move on to recognising that we have responsibilities and that we are never as closely aligned with God's way of love as we could or should be. That is where the call to repentance comes in. Repentance is not wallowing in guilt for the things you have done; it's being spurred by your conscience to recognise the hurt and harm you have caused to others and the insult given to God, by letting your vices take over your virtues – and doing something about it.

The vices, selfishness, greed, impatience, arrogance, insatiability and envy, to name a few especially common ones, need to be replaced in us by compassion, calm, humility, contentment and delight in the achievement and good fortunes of others. It's unlikely that you will undergo that transformation while enjoying a service of light, music, movement and words in this Chapel. But if such a service doesn't incline you to at least *want* to shake off the vices and embrace the Christian virtues it won't have done its job as a Procession for Advent.

That job is to take us from the place of despair to the place of repentance; the place of spiritual and practical re-orientation. For Advent calls us, God calls us, to turn *from* our unhealthy self-obsessions and the minor negativities that dominate our outlook on life, and to turn *towards* the love of others and the worship of God that is our true joy and lasting pleasure – the purpose for which we are called.

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