

Advent, Again

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John the Baptist probably had little use for the professional theologians of his day. The stock and trade of theologians, of all stripes in every age, is the carefully constructed qualifier—"on the one hand," "in one sense," and "from one point of view." But John the Baptist did not have time to hedge his bets by means of carefully constructed qualifiers. His message was not, "Let us consider the relative merits of the kingdom of heaven." Rather, John's daily bread was a simple command and a clear assertion—"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Most preachers who have had the benefit of theological education know enough to stay away from simple commands and clear assertions. They will do you in everytime. To assert without qualification that the kingdom of heaven is at hand is risky business. The assertion is either true or false, and, finally, there is no escaping that judgment, not even by means of carefully constructed qualifiers. Apparently, John had not yet heard of the theologians' clever distinction between the "already" and the "not yet"; at least we have no evidence that John ever proclaimed that the kingdom of heaven is and is not yet. John refused to seek shelter in the ambiguity of clever distinctions, lost his head, and asserted that the kingdom of heaven is "at hand."

Few preachers since John's time have taken up his cause. When was the last time you heard a sermon proclaim unequivocally that the kingdom of heaven is at hand? John's message has become the proclamation of a noble cause which appeared in human history some two thousand years ago and which remains a vague hope for Christians in the distant future, a future so distant as to render the hope vacuous.

To be fair, it is not easy to take up the Baptist's cause. There is finally a deep incongruity between Jesus' message and Christian existence. The two may not be contradictory, but they are at least incongruous. The reader of the New Testament suspects that the last thing John expected in response to his message was the emergence of a new religion complete with cult, liturgy, celebrants, and church night suppers. And yet the Christian community celebrates John and his message every Advent season, year after year. Every Advent John comes demanding repentance and proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of heaven. The season of Advent and with it John's bizarre message are as regular as the tides at the ocean shore. But there is nothing "regular" about John's message and therein lies the incongruity. There is nothing cyclical about "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." John is not talking about a recurrent, cyclical lectionary text, a theological theme to be celebrated at the appropriate time of year. His attention is firmly riveted on the present moment. He is not talking about the best way to celebrate the structure of the Christian year. He is interested only in the present moment and in his listeners' response to his message.

When John's message became a part of the liturgical season of Advent (and everything which accompanies it in the life of the church), it became difficult, if not impossible, for those who came after John to take up his cause. The listener hears the message—"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"—and yet the listener knows at some level of consciousness that while the kingdom may or may not be at hand, it will come again, or if not the kingdom at least the liturgical season will come again. And after many years, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between the kingdom of God and the liturgical season of Advent. Advent will come again as surely as December follows November, as surely as low tide follows high. And in one sense (if you will pardon the qualifier), John's message is betrayed by the cyclical regularity of Christian liturgy. If the kingdom of heaven is at hand every Advent, then its "at handedness" is a different sort than what John seemed to intend. If John and his message about the kingdom roll around every Advent, then they are no more present now than they were in years past or than they will be in future Advents.

This incongruity between John's message and its liturgical expression assumes various forms. Liturgy is sometimes understood to convey a particular interpretation of reality. John's message, however, is neither a "point or view" nor a philosophy. It is not a system of thought which orders experience and interprets the structure of reality. John would have found disbelief in the kingdom and outright rejection of his message no more objectionable than a careful, studied consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of his position. John wanted only one thing—for people to repent and order their lives to the reality of God's reign in the world. There is good reason to suspect that the last thing that John wanted or expected was for his message about the kingdom to become an "interesting idea." Better the response of Herod and Herodias than for the kingdom of God to become a religious abstraction.

And of course that is precisely the danger that the liturgical year poses for John's message about the kingdom, and, more importantly, for our capacity to preach and hear the good news about the kingdom. If John's message is no more a reality now than it was in the past or will be in the future, then it does not bear on the present moment with urgency, and it is, at best, an idea to be considered. The "at handedness" of the kingdom becomes more an idea to be entertained than a Word which demands response and obedience. The cyclical nature of the liturgical year turns John's message into an abstraction. Precisely because John's message is equally relevant for *all* Advent seasons, it cannot have special significance for *this* Advent and *this* moment. Because it is as predictable and as regular as the tide, it loses its startling, unpredictable power to disrupt the serial flow of history in general and our personal lives in particular.

John the Baptist suffered the same fate as have many others, both before and after him, who were not content to deal with the world at the safe distance of the general and the abstract. It may be acceptable for others to denounce the evil of the world; it is rarely acceptable for them to denounce *our* evil. No one likes to be addressed by "You brood of vipers!" If John had been content

to present the kingdom of heaven as an interesting idea, as an abstract theological concept, then perhaps he would not have come to such a nasty end.

And John's successor fared no better. Jesus of Nazareth is, if anything, more specific than John. In Jesus' teaching not only is the kingdom of God at hand, but it is present in his words, deeds, and person. "And blessed is he who takes no offense at me" (Matt. 11:6). Not only is the kingdom "at hand" but it has come in the person of Jesus with power and glory. And yet Jesus and his kingdom are just as difficult a topic for Advent preaching as are John and his message of repentance. Jesus, like John, turns up every Advent with striking regularity, and it is the monotony and predictability of the liturgical calendar which makes it difficult to proclaim the scandal of Jesus' particularity. More often than not, the Jesus the church proclaims is a theological abstraction, a doctrinal generality, a pious sentiment. Such a Jesus will surely give no offense, at least not in our age. Perhaps at another time, when theological convictions were a matter of life and death, the Jesus of the church's theology might have been an issue, but not in our time. All forms of doctrine are now commonly dismissed as abstract, intellectual puzzles. In so far as the Jesus who comes every Advent is the Christ of the church's theology, the Christ of Nicea and Chalcedon, he comes to us as an abstraction which large numbers of people in the church do not understand, evoking a giant yawn and massive indifference.

Theology is vitally important to the life of the church, but theology—at least the appearance thereof—can be one of the insidious ways in which the church domesticates Jesus and makes him acceptable to a disbelieving world. As long as the reality of Jesus is primarily that of a liturgical celebration and a theological doctrine, he cannot be taken with the same seriousness as the one who said to John's disciples,

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them (Matt. 11:4-5).

It is the one who says and does these things who is the basis of the church's theology, but it is also finally what Karl Barth described as Jesus' "life-act" and not what the church believes about Jesus that is the scandal and the offense of the Gospel.

Why is it so difficult to preach the Gospel during the season of Advent? As we have seen, in part the difficulty is the reality and the structure of the church's liturgy. Both John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth insist that the present is filled with the urgency of God's kingdom. Christian liturgy, on the other hand, reminds us that this season of Advent has had many predecessors and will be followed by Christmas and Epiphany, just as was each previous Advent. The regular recurrence of the liturgical season diminishes the particularity of John's preaching and Jesus' life-act by turning them into timeless scenes in an eternal Advent tableau.

And what is to be done when the calendar turns and once again it is time for Advent? The solution is certainly not to be found at the level of the general and the abstract. If we have learned nothing else, surely we have learned that. The solution is not a general interpretation of what John meant by "at

hand”—in other words, not a new Christian philosophy of history—nor a more abstract interpretation of the universal and cosmic significance of Jesus. The solution is not to move in the direction of the general and the abstract, but in the reverse direction to the particular and the specific. “The blind receive their sight and the lame walk . . . and the poor have good news preached to them.” According to the New Testament, it is in that sense and in that sense alone that the kingdom of God is at hand. The kingdom is present when and where Jesus is healing and when and where he proclaims good news to the poor. There is nothing abstract and general about these acts. They are as concrete and as specific as the grace and love of God.

The scandal and the offense of the Gospel is not simply that the Messiah was crucified. The cross is perhaps the most important event in the divine drama of redemption, but what is most offensive about the Gospel is not just the cross but the particularity of the Christ event in its entirety. The scandal is not the abstract claim that “God is love”; the scandal is the Christian confession that the Jesus who seeks out lepers, prostitutes, and sinners is the incarnation of the will and love of God. The scandal is that the New Testament points to what Jesus says and does and asserts that this is the reality of God.

The world has always had great difficulty with the particularity of the Gospel. Peter already knows what the Messiah will do and tries to make Jesus conform to his expectations. Theologians in the early church evade the particularity of the Gospel (for the legitimate purpose of making transcultural claims) by turning Jesus into the principle of universal wisdom. In recent years, the churches often seems more interested in whether its ministers have memorized certain christological formulas than whether they understand what these formulas have to do with the Jesus who wants to break bread with those who are the refuse of the world. And Advent has become the liturgical and commercial season in which to prepare for the fantasy of Christmas rather than a time in which the church waits, watches, and participates in the healing of the blind and the lame and the release of the poor.

It is sometimes argued that the problem with Advent is that it is incompatible with New Testament (especially Pauline) eschatology. For Paul, Jesus is coming again to hand over the kingdom to the Father; but Jesus comes again only once, when the last trumpet sounds. In the liturgy of the Christian community, Jesus comes again and again, but somehow the kingdom never quite appears. Or at least so it seems. Theologians have responded to the dilemma by demythologizing New Testament eschatology in order to make it compatible with contemporary interpretations of reality. The alternative is to insist that Christian faith and hope are wedded to first century eschatology and as such are irrelevant to the present age. It may be, however, that both alternatives are mistaken, for both resolve the scandal of the particularity of the Gospel by means of interpretations of history. In the New Testament, on the other hand, the church is not promised that it will understand the “last things” or that it will know their day and hour. The church is simply told to wait and watch for the Jesus who heals and liberates. The test for good Advent preaching is not whether it maintains a proper balance between the already and the

not yet of the kingdom, but whether it does not shy away from the particularity and the scandal of the one who seeks out sinners.