

When the Fullness of Time Was Come

Galatians 4:4

Stuart McWilliam*

This is the time of the year when people tend to say to one another, “Are you ready for Christmas? I am nowhere near ready! I cannot see myself ever being ready for Christmas this year!” Of course they are referring to their secular preparations for Christmas, the buying of gifts, the sending of cards, the making of food, the arranging of parties, all that kind of thing. How many, I wonder, will at any point stop to ask, “Am I really ready for Christmas—in the spiritual sense—ready for what Christmas really means—the coming of God in Christ—am I really ready? Will I ever be ready?”

Advent is the season the Church has set aside for the preparation for Christmas—not that we may be sure that the Christmas cake has been baked, the presents bought, the tree lights in working order—not that kind of preparation—but that we may be ready for the coming of the Lord and not be taken by surprise. In this sense, are we ready? As we celebrate it, Christmas is a time of great tenderness and joy, of Christmas trees with stars on top and angels like cherubs with tilted haloes, of roast turkey and plum pudding, of mothers weak at the knees from Christmas shopping and children beside themselves with expectation, of crowds thronging the streets and gazing open mouthed at decorations that have transformed the drab and the gray into a kind of fairy wonderland, of holly and mistletoe and carols and parties and endless renderings of “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas” and “Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” It all comes to a climax with children scrubbed clean and with excited faces, gathered with busy mothers, indulgent fathers, amused grandfathers, and proud grandmothers around the Christmas tree, all of them enhanced by candle light!

Yet when we read the lessons prescribed in the lectionary for the four Sundays in Advent leading up to Christmas, they hardly reflect this kind of cozy, comfortable atmosphere. Indeed, we discover that they do not add a single candle or Yuletide log to our scheme of Christmas decorations. They have a very different emphasis. All the Old Testament passages speak to us somberly of judgment, and all the New Testament passages urge us to prepare for the coming of Christ, not as a little baby but as Lord.

In a profound sense it is true that we spend our lives waiting for something or someone. As children, we wait eagerly for the day when we shall go to school and then, perhaps with even greater eagerness, for the day when we shall leave school. We wait for the day when we can begin our life’s work, the day when, we tell ourselves, all the study and preparation will be over. We wait for the day when we shall be married, for the birth of our children. We wait, sometimes apprehensively, for the day when the children will no longer need us, when they will be able to look after themselves and order their own lives. We wait for the day when we shall retire from work, and perhaps we dread that day because we fear that when it comes there will be nothing more for which to wait, but then comes the waiting for grandchildren or the children of our

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friends' children. Always there seems to be something to wait for, or at least we hope there will always be something for which to wait. Otherwise we might as well be dead! Our lives are shot through with the sense of waiting, of expectancy, and yet, as we grow older, there comes increasingly the realization that when what we have been waiting for comes, it is, however good, never as completely satisfying as we had hoped it would be, else, why do we, as soon as we have received it, go on to wait for something else?

The truth, of course, is that what we are really waiting for, even when we do not realize it, is God, the One who will come to make sense of our lives, to give meaning to our hopes and fears, our joys and sorrows, and to all the other things for which we have waited. We are really waiting for the coming of the Lord, and at the heart of the Gospel is the assurance that He has come, does come, will come. Are we ready?

It took God centuries of time to prepare the coming of Christ. From creation, through the calling of Abraham, the choice of Moses, the separating out of His chosen people with their strange, twisted, tortured history and its triumphs and tragedies, successes and failures, its seeming disasters that turned out not to be disasters at all, and its seeming victories that often turned out to be the most monumental defeats. All of it culminating in the coming of Christ, of the child born in Bethlehem. Yet when He came, how few there were who were really ready to receive Him.

Bethlehem was not ready, although the prophet had written, "And thou Bethlehem in the land of Judah are not least among the princes of Judah for out of thee shall come a governor that shall rule my people Israel." What could have been plainer than that? Yet Bethlehem was not ready. There was no room in the inn, and the Son of God was born in a stable! Herod was not ready, although he was the king of the Jews, of the Chosen People whom God had been preparing down through the ages. Yet Herod was not ready. He gave orders that the child should be slain!

The Scribes and the Pharisees, the Priests and the Levites, the religious people were not ready, although they had been praying continuously for the coming of the Messiah and calling upon their people to prepare for His coming. Yet when He came they were, none of them, ready to receive Him.

Christmas came too early that year, as for some it always seems to come too early! He came to be the Prince of Peace. He came to bring justice and compassion; He came to release men and women from their bondage to sin. He came to live the life of love among men and women.

And they nailed Him to a cross, these good religious people who had been praying for His coming, because they were not ready for Him. Did He perhaps come too soon, do you think? And if He had come a few hundred years later, in our time for example, would it all have been very different?

Paul says that it was "the fullness of time," the right time! But could Paul have been mistaken? Was it just a bit too early? Had God got His timing wrong? Would it have been different if He had come later?

Are we ready? Are we ready for Peace, Justice, Love? Are we ready to be released from our sins? Or is it still too soon, and will it always be too soon, too soon for Peace, too soon for Justice, too soon for Love? Must they always be somewhere in the future, in the "sweet bye and bye," and will we go on forever saying, "We're not ready for this kind of thing yet"?

Not ready to abandon the weapons of war: someone might take advantage of us. Not ready to share the fruits of the earth: there might not be enough to go round. Not

ready to recognize all men and women as our brothers and sisters, especially if they are the wrong color.

Not ready to forgive our enemies—much too risky. Not ready to love our neighbors, not ready to abandon our pride and our pettiness, not ready to put away “the works of darkness” and repent because the “Kingdom of God is at hand.” Will Christmas be too early again this year? Is it always going to come too soon?

The answer, of course, is not that Christ comes too soon but that we come to Him too late. Well! He is coming again! And I do not mean by that what people so often seem to mean when they talk about Christ coming again, that the end of the world is at hand. It may be, for all I know, but thank goodness that is not my concern.

I mean that this Christ keeps coming and coming again and again to us, demanding our verdict and our commitment to Him. This is what Christmas is about. It is about God coming to men and women. It is about God coming to you and to me.

One of the great attractions of Christmas is that once a year it allows us to soak ourselves for a little in what is familiar—familiar carols, customs, and rites. But this, however comforting it may be, can be very dangerous if it obscures the Advent of God in Christ. It can be very dangerous if it hides what the coming of God means Christmas is, in many ways a much more dangerous festival for the Church to celebrate than Easter because it is so much easier to domesticate it, to tame it. You cannot really destroy the awe, the terror, the splendor and the mystery of the Resurrection. You cannot domesticate it, make it cozy and comfortable, but you can turn Christmas into a nice warm, sentimental celebration, and we must not do that! We must not make God into a baby and tie Him up in a cradle so that we need no longer listen to His insistent demands upon us and upon our lives. Yet sometimes, it seems this is precisely what we do. We turn the great mystery of the Incarnation, of God made man into a fairy story for children, and if this is what we do, then small wonder if we are not ready for Christmas, for the coming of Him for whom we say we have been waiting.

Are we ready now? Because this is precisely what is happening. Christ is coming to each one of us, offering Himself to us that He may live in us and we in Him, and all he asks is that we should receive Him, that we should give Him room.

Are we ready? Not really?

You have a lot of doubts, a lot of things about which you are not sure, and you know that you have not been what you should have been, and perhaps you are not sure that you can ever be what you should be!

I can share your feelings! But do you love Him? And do you want forgiveness? And would you like to be better? And, in spite of everything, do you believe that there really is no other way for the world than His way?

Then perhaps you are as ready as you will ever be, and after all, the important thing is that He is ready for you! So let us take what He offers now, Himself, and perhaps, after all, we will be ready for Christmas this year.

“I am not worthy; cold and bare
the lodging of my soul
How cans’t thou deign to enter there
Lord speak and make me whole.”