

The liturgy of Advent, like so much recent theological writing, is preoccupied with the future—the future as one of the ways in which we reach out towards the meaning of God. The theologian expresses his concern by more or (rather too often) less rational analysis and frequently, these days, in language borrowed from Teilhard de Chardin or Karl Marx. The liturgy, on the other hand, always at its best when it is least didactic, simply presents images for our meditation. The first image we find offered to us in the season of Advent is the figure of John the Baptist.

Here the attention is on the sinfulness of this present age, this 'brood of vipers' who must 'flee from the wrath to come'. The future presents itself as menacing and destructive, the structures of our world are to come crashing down as 'the axe is laid to the root of the tree'. Confronted by the holiness of God the whole apparatus of human power and exploitation, represented here in Luke by that extremely familiar triad, the rich, the government officials and the soldiers, will fall to pieces: there is to be a baptism in the Holy Spirit and in fire.

That the visitation of God demands and indeed creates a conversion in a man, a radical change of his previous self, a destruction and rebuilding of his personality—this has been well understood in the Christian churches. It has been emphasized perhaps most dramatically in some of the Protestant evangelical churches but in some form it is an essential element in any Christian understanding of the gospel. What seems to us surprising nowadays is that Christians have been so slow to see this same truth in what we might call its public dimension. This is the more surprising because in the New Testament itself, with its talk of the kingdom, of 'the prince of this world' and so on, it is usually the public or social aspect that seems to come first; we have, however, found it relatively easy to treat all this as metaphor and to regard the gospel message as applying primarily, if not exclusively, to the private life. Perhaps it is only in our time that men have become critically aware that personal human life is not lived *within* society, as within an external framework, but that our social relationships, the institutions and structures of our society are themselves constituents of our personal life. We can now see that saving our souls does not mean saving something confined within our individual bodies, it means transforming and liberating the ways in which people are related to each other. It involves changing the network of modes of human communication which makes up a human culture, a human society. A man's interior life, his soul, is not essentially his secret life, it is a certain quality, a quality of seriousness in his sharing of his life with others. Our souls are not saved *because* we live in charity; to be saved *is*

to live in charity, to belong in a profound way to others, to belong in the Holy Spirit to others. Now this is a social, in a sense a 'political', condition. There is no simple one-way process by which individuals in whom the victory over self has privately been won then automatically bring about victory over the dehumanizing elements in our society. The struggle within each man is conditioned by and conditions the struggle within society. What we have come to call 'morals' (meaning the critique of individual behaviour) is not reducible to what we are beginning to call 'politics' (meaning not just party rivalries, but a general critique of power in society), but neither is politics reducible to morals.

John the Baptist, then, represents the cataclysmic element in the gospel, the need to turn our back on the past in order to receive the future, the rejection of any optimistic idea that a mere improvement in the present situation (a closer observance of the works of the Law) will necessarily bring about a renewed future.

But the figure of John the Baptist is complemented and balanced by the other great image of the Advent liturgy, that of the virgin mother: the virgin Israel, the virgin Mary, the virgin Mother Church. Here the present is pregnant with the future, salvation does not belong to some wholly distant world which we could only enter by escaping from or destroying this one. The Church is not simply a revolutionary movement devoted to a radical and negative criticism of the values of our society and the institutions that embody them, she also celebrates that our world is pregnant with the world to come. Not, indeed, pregnant by the power of man: it is not the great ones of this world, the rich and the powerful who will create the new age; our mother is the virgin who brings forth salvation by the power of God who works in the poor and the despised.

There is, thus, a certain ambiguity in the way in which the Christian regards the future, the way in which he celebrates Advent and awaits the coming of the Lord. What we look forward to is simultaneously judgment and resurrection, the Day of Wrath but also the Day that the Lord has made—let us be glad and rejoice in it.

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Jonathan Power *on the Foreign Aid Industry*

Adrian Edwards *on Witchcraft*

Michael Hollings *on the Christian as Counsellor*