

The new world of Advent–Christmas

When I was younger, the feast of Christ the King captured my imagination. Perhaps it was because Christ the King was the patron of the cathedral of my home town, Hamilton. There, in all its neo-gothic glory, the cathedral perched atop a hill that now overlooks several major thoroughfares. Perhaps it was because one of my favourite piano pieces was Claude Debussy's *Sunken Cathedral*, and I could imagine the cathedral—of Christ the King, of course—rising magnificently from the misty depths, bells pealing. My images of Christ the King were unabashedly triumphant—or, more accurately, triumphalistic. I remember my shock the first time I encountered the readings for the feast from Year C: all those triumphant hymns sounded off key. The feast was inviting us to enter into the mystery of Christ's kingship in another key: God's mercy and compassion as we know them from the cross. Suddenly the cross, which had receded to a safe Good Friday distance had been inserted into the pivotal feast between the end of one liturgical year, and the beginning of another. Suddenly the cross was casting a shadow over the Advent season, a shadow that stretched into the Christmas season itself.

Now it's less shocking, but still challenging. I see the "fit" between the feast and the upcoming seasons, but the challenge still prods me. The forgiven

thief to whom Jesus promises companionship in paradise anticipates the healing and reconciliation at the heart of the Advent season, where the reconciliation of enemies is expressed in yet other images: the wolf lives with the lamb, the leopard with the kid, and the calf, the lion and the fatling together. The food chain has been broken. Swords are beat into ploughshares: what killed life can now be used as one of the elements in nurturing it. A whole new way of life is initiated.

Then I move on through the Christmas season, where the mystery of reconciliation stands at its heart. The opposition between mortality and immortality, between immanence and transcendence, between human and divine has been overcome, again by God's mercy and compassion, this time expressed in the human flesh of Emmanuel, God-with-us. God didn't become every human being—for that would be impossible, indeed, inhuman. God took flesh in a Jewish male child, born of the line of David, birthed in a stable in Bethlehem. Two thousand years ago. God took on the limitations and particularity of gender, culture, body, language, geography, family, history—and death. The utterly transcendent, totally Other took on human flesh. This is life that is as paschal as that of Easter, for the divine self is poured out in the enfleshment of Jesus,

the eternal Word. A whole new way of life is initiated.

This mystery is so big that it both boggles the mind and provides a context for some of the issues that vex us today. If reconciliation and particularity are at the heart of the Advent-Christmas manifestation of the paschal mystery, how does something like July's *motu proprio* on the use of the preconciliar Latin liturgy look in this context? Pope Benedict indicates that it is meant to offer the possibility of reconciliation to a group of schismatic brothers and sisters. Having seen up close their tactics when I was studying in Paris—taking over a church by force and dumping the pastor on the front steps would be among their more violent gestures, I must confess to being less than hopeful that this reconciliation will ensue, since the issues are far deeper than the use of Latin, including political and theological agendas. I hope that Pope Benedict is correct, and that this reconciliation will be possible. But his concern for such reconciliation made me begin to dream of the possibilities of reconciliation in other situations of alienation.

Take, for instance, the question of inculturation of the liturgy. What if this move to admit wider use of the Latin Rite of Blessed John XXIII, as Pope Benedict calls the Roman Missal of 1962, signaled a more generalized openness to a variety of rites within the Roman Rite? Aboriginal rites, for example, for the aboriginal peoples of Canada, the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, Central and South America? Inculturated rites for the churches of North America that serve post-modern men and women? In other words, have we really looked at our culture closely enough to be able to inculturate or rites, or do we tend to think that rites arrive from Rome, and all we need to do is “add water and implement”? More and more, we are discovering the inadequacy of such an

approach, an inadequacy that is revealed by music, gesture and language. What if—and it's just a thought—the new translation of the *Ordo Missae* that has been so lamented in some articles in other prominent Catholic magazines became simply the “editio typica” of the English-language Order of Mass? Working from it, experts in the spoken English of different parts of the world would render it into the best English of their own homelands. This would be a fine example of the scandalous particularity of the incarnation, and might be a happy solution to what many fear will be a translation that will prove un-prayable in our context.

To pursue this line of thinking, however, we need a theology that takes seriously the particularity and vulnerability of our sisters and brothers, that remembers the incarnation and works out of its principles in concrete, tangible ways, both in the liturgy, and in every aspect of our life as a Christian community. Furthermore, we need an Advent spirituality that wants to prepare the way of the Lord: make it easy for God to access God's people. Straight highways (think prairie highways where you can see forever!); valleys lifted up and mountain and hills leveled so that the road is smooth and direct; graders leveling the ground and the bumpy spots. And why? So God can get to the people! God wants to come to us, and God has shown how deep is that desire by communicating in the word we understand best: a human being like us. God still desires to speak with all people today, to speak the peace for which human hearts long so deeply. God yearns to save all people, to embrace all people, most particularly the needy, the poor and those who have no helper. This is the God who offers forgiveness to the one who asks for it, even when he is dying. Our job is to prepare God's way—to make it easy for

God reach humanity, to reach *all* God's people, especially those who are most vulnerable and alienated. This is the Christ the King whom we celebrate this year, an image articulated well by Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation II: "In that new world, where the fullness of your peace will be revealed, gather people of every race, language and way of life to share in the one eternal banquet with Jesus Christ the Lord."

That's Christ the King. Advent, too. And Christmas. The food chain has been broken, and the one who breaks it gives himself to us as food. A new food chain is established, and with it, a new world.

May the peace of that new world bring peace to your hearts and sustain the work of all people of good will who seek to bring peace to our wounded world.

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