

Seeds of Desire

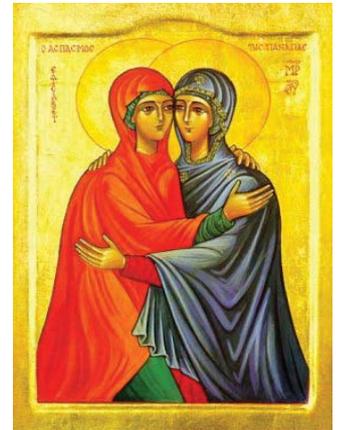
Made in God's astonishing image, we can never settle for less

Some things you don't easily forget. I still remember a special moment from around this time some years ago. Their small faces ablaze with innocence Bill and Jack lit the first purple candle in our Advent wreath. Something about the way they shyly smiled at each other was already providing us with a glimpse into the mystery for which we were preparing. What I was feeling was a kind of aching and longing. The focus shifted from the external rubric to the inner reality. A silent chord was struck.

'Who looks outside dreams,' wrote Carl Jung, 'who looks inside awakens.'

When I was a child we needed a freshwater well at home. I can still remember the water diviner, in total concentration, as he walked across our small yard. Like horse whisperers and alchemists, he had 'the gift'. At one with his lightly held twig, he 'divined' the presence of the sweetest water deep down in the earth, waiting to rush free and fast to the surface for our family and neighbours.

On that wintry Sunday, Bill and Jack, too, had 'the gift'. In one innocent instant, they had enabled us to 'divine' our divinity, to sense God's indelible image within even the most careless and sinful of us that morning. Theirs was a ministry of discovery – that deep down, below the rubble and sins of our lives, runs that underground river of God's faithful devotion, that, hidden beneath the unyielding land of our daily existence, run the veins of gold.



This surely is the work of the church – to find the hidden well of mystery within us; to recover, when we are lost, the revelation of our own shrouded beginnings. We forget our destiny. God's dream for us remains unremembered. I like to think of the priest in Advent as the guide up ahead, the spy deep inside, who charts and discerns with us the terrain, the horizons and the substance of our lives through the filter of Incarnation. *'The priest is a poet and more,' Karl Rahner wrote, 'the poet listens to life. The priest listens to life under the influence of the Word.'*



One reason why Advent carries such a tangible impact is its potential response to the existential longing that never stops nagging at our human souls. A lust to live life to the full, to love like the greatest lovers, courses relentlessly in our bloodstreams. Everything about us is constantly tinged with an incessant yearning for some indefinable reality. This raw

and relentless compulsion to transcend our own mortality is the restlessness of the indwelling Holy Spirit, drawing us towards the heart of God.

Robert Browning wrote :

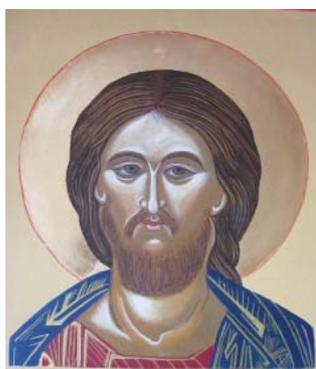
'Ah! But a man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?'

The liturgy of the Christian Church, at its best, responds to this mystery of our inner truth, we pray, 'Lead us to seek beyond our reach; 'Our longing for your presence is more than for life itself'; 'The love you give us always exceeds the furthest expression of our human desire'. Advent is not about waiting for the baby Jesus as though nobody had told us he had already arrived. It is, rather, about trying to make sense of that intense and disturbing imperative for a completeness that always eludes us, that burns in our flesh and that never leaves us alone.

After all, as Meister Eckhart insisted, we are all born with God's seed in us. Our lives are the womb that brings that seed to birth. The Advent moment – our lives in miniature – reminds us that we are coded for God; we are programmed for heaven; we are an incompleteness searching for completeness. As rivers flow and winds blow, so, too, the human heart, with its imagination, affections and creativity, will never be – cannot ever be – other than God-bound. *Corda nostra – capax mundi, capax Dei.*

Advent paints for us a picture of the ultimate horizon of our longings. It holds up before us the mirror-image of our destiny. (Maybe that is what moved us when Bill and Jack brought a ray of bright colour into our winter lives.) But, in the very same breath, the first readings of Advent also waken us up to the danger of arriving home too soon, of settling, prematurely, for lesser unions, or, in scriptural imagery, of 'missing the mark', mistaking false gods for God. Because the universal, relentless allurements towards intimacy within all of us is so strong, we are easily seduced out of what's true. The sin, then, lies not in the pursuit of the fulfilment of our days and nights but in the setting up of the shop of our lives at the wrong address, in misreading 'true north' in the compass of our brief existence on this earth.

Advent reminds us of, and returns us to, our true roots, to God's first dream for us. It traces our family tree in the genealogy of Matthew. The infancy of Jesus is the infancy of all of us. That is why 'our hearts are restless until they rest in God'. But the bother is that we forget. A strange shadow called original sin obscures the original vision of our holy heritage. A routine darkness falls across the window of our bright destiny.



There is a story that might help us here, about a church in the Netherlands. On entering the building, everyone would stop and bow in the direction of a whitewashed wall. It was a tradition that nobody questioned. They felt it was the right thing to do. One day the parish decided to renovate the church. They began to strip the paint off the old walls. While doing this they discovered traces of a painting on the wall towards which everyone bowed, but nobody knew why. Very carefully they peeled off the layers of whitewash. What emerged was an ancient, and very beautiful, painting of Christ. Nobody was old enough to have actually seen it. But now they came to understand why they almost instinctively persisted in honouring the wall that concealed the glorious work of art. The holy work of Advent is, I think, a little like that. It peels away the false veneer to reveal and restore under our December anxiety and excitement the unique masterpiece that underpins, inspires and echoes the eternal longing of every human/divine heart.

And the shock of seeing that original masterpiece should turn our lives upside down. *'Make ready for the Christ; wrote Thomas Merton, 'whose smile, like lightning, sets free the song of everlasting glory that now sleeps, in your paper flesh, like dynamite.'* But it is all so overwhelming. It is too disturbing and frightening. Like Mary, we struggle with the challenge of the invitation. Can this really be true? Is this the destiny for which our hearts have been searching?

In the Opening Prayer of the first Sunday in Advent, we asked that 'our longing may be increased'. Maybe God will take us at our word and send along another Bill and Jack to light a candle. And maybe its light will reach our waiting womb. And then, with Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, when we trust those stirrings within us, a new creation begins, and our awakening life, like theirs, will leap within us for joy.

