

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 5th December – Synod – a way of being Church

It happened in Rathmore, my home village in the south of Ireland. It is one of my first memories. It was Christmas Eve and I was four. The snow had started to fall. I was standing near the small door between our small shop and our small kitchen. I was beside myself with anticipation, hyped to the gills with Santa Claus. Christy Cremin had just bought his weekly ration of Woodbines. “Where is he now Christy?” my mother called out. I shivered with excitement. “Oh I’ve just seen him, Madge,” Christy replied, “He’s at Rathbeg Cross. He’ll be here by midnight.”

Every time I reflect on that moment, I still tend to fill up with emotion. Why should this be so? I think it has to do with something within us that is always wanting more, always expecting, always waiting for some impossible dream. Even in childhood, it is the way we are made. We are full of a yearning for what is beyond us. There is a deep desire to be more than we are, to experience life and love more fully, even to be like God. We want to shine like the stars, to fly like the birds, to love like the greatest lovers. There is a lust for ‘life to the full’ in most of our bloodstreams.

Advent is about waiting and wanting and wishing. It taps into the deep veins of our essential human nature. It touches those places inside us where we most resemble God – the relentless potential we carry for achieving our divine destiny. Even though we invariably forget God’s dream for us, we still hold an echo of its power. We have intimations of our uniqueness, glimpses of how special we are. We are unique and special because we are loved so intensely and unconditionally. This is what Advent reminds us of. It traces our family tree back to its sacred source in God.

All life is fired by longing

I often tell a story to illustrate this kind of truth. There was an Indian brave who found an eagle’s egg that had fallen to the ground. Being in a hurry, he dropped it carefully into the nearest nest. This belonged to the family of a prairie hen, who reared and nurtured the newcomer, presuming it to be her own. The baby eagle had no idea about its true identity. It grew up with its adopted sisters and brothers, doing all the things that prairie chickens do. It hopped and scratched just like they did; it adapted itself to the limited parameters of their narrow horizons.

Until one day a magnificent eagle soared imperiously across a cloudless sky. The startled fledgling was mesmerised at the sight. A strange aching burned in its heart. Its spirit lifted in unison with the elegant chevalier of the skies. “Don’t you dare,” cried out the watchful prairie hen-mother, “don’t you dare get any fancy ideas, you vain creature. You will never be an eagle. You will always be a hopping, scratching chicken – just like the rest of us.”

These intimations of an infinite source and destiny lives in all creation, groaning, as St Paul says, until God is all in all. This powerful push is in everything. All life is fired by longing. I have read that if you put a two-inch band of solid steel around a young watermelon it will, as it grows, slowly burst that steel. The same implacable pressure is found in all of nature. The human heart is no different. It is full of the instinct to reach out beyond itself, to bring joy and justice everywhere. There is a restlessness in all of us, a searching that is very hard to truly satisfy. And it is always there. Nor is it a wishful, wistful fantasy.

This imperative of our hearts is recognised and honoured during the Advent season. Its rites and readings explain the origins of our waiting, of our relentless seeking and yearning. God’s seed is within us when we are born, the mystics tell us, and as we grow, so does the seed. This growth is a deep fire, making us reach for the heavens while we are still on earth. The sacred fire I write about is a burning and powerful urge, an incessant hunger for more. “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee” wrote St Augustine.

All longing is basically a longing for God. Christmas celebrates the fact that the end of our growing is our intimacy with the Trinity, our similarity, as St John puts it, to God's own self. God's heart beats in ours; it prays and dreams within us; it strives and groans in us – but it never dies in us.

What strange feelings flood our hearts these Advent days! We feel the mystery of God around us and within us. We sense the sleeping baby, or rather the sleeping giant, inside our souls. But while we are waiting, we are also finding. There is a sense in which that for which we search *is* already at home with us. The saints have insisted on this consoling truth. We may be always travelling, but we are also always arriving.

To be waiting is to have found

The adventure of Advent is already written into our DNA from the beginning. It isn't as though we suddenly stumble across a stable and are startled to find the baby Jesus lying in the manger. What happens, I think, is that we begin to recognise the presence of God in a new and richer way. We are already coded and fashioned to do this. There is a readiness within us to notice the nearness of God all around us. We are, our best theologians assure us, created for this to happen.

With the eyes of faith, then, we look at the small crib-baby and we believe that God's huge heart beats in that tiny little frame. This astonishes us. It astonishes us anew every Christmas. Because it means that God's heart beats in our uncertain hearts too. This transforms our lives – the way we look at everything, relate to others, let go of things, make decisions, try to forgive, resist the temptation to despair, sleep with our spouses, and go to Mass on Sunday. It enables us to wake up in the morning with new hope, to go to sleep at night with a deeper trust. And it keeps the Longing alive – the Longing that gave birth to the stars, that gave birth to the Baby, that still gives birth to all life. Who knows what that Longing will give birth to, within our own waiting hearts, during 2005? (

[T And for us in 2022? From a Tablet article published in 2005\)](#)