

## Advent Antidote

To a soundtrack of crashing thunder, swarming mosquitoes and collapsing ice, visitors to Tate Britain will find its classical façade currently festooned with tangled lights, spattered mud and torn banners. These post-apocalyptic 'Christmas decs' are the brain-child of British artist Anne Hardy, and, although not exactly festive, they capture more of the spirit of Advent than tinsel and fairies.

The installation entitled 'The depth of darkness, the return of light' is a prophetic warning of ecological disaster and its aftermath. And that's sobering and deeply uncomfortable and definitely not very Christmassy. But this staged devastation echoes powerfully those challenging Advent themes of End Times and the Second Coming or Second Advent. I can't help but think that John the Baptist would approve.

John, you might remember, was the cousin of Jesus, and after five hundred years of radio silence from God, John emerges from the desert looking every bit the Old Testament Prophet and acting like God's air-raid siren. His message is uncompromising – judgement is coming, he says, so wake up, repent, be baptised. Come clean about your life, change its direction and join a movement in preparation for the Chosen One; the long-expected Messiah.

And later, of course, he would have his own moment of awakening when he realised that this Chosen One, this Messiah, was none other than his younger cousin. And, from then on, John begins to step back to allow Jesus centre stage.

Along the way, such straight-talking had made John popular with the masses but extremely unpopular with various powers-that-be, including puppet king Herod Antipas, who tried to silence the Baptist's ranting by throwing him into prison. And it's from that prison cell that John somehow gets a message to Jesus. And that message is very revealing; 'Are you the One?' he asks, 'or did I get it wrong?'

Did I talent spot the wrong man?'. Why did John have this sudden crisis of faith? The only explanation I can think of is that, somehow, Jesus wasn't quite the Messiah John was expecting. Maybe he wanted more hell-fire, more retribution; more uprising. Instead, his cousin shuns the limelight, plays doctor to the sick; breaks bread with the outcast.

In response, Jesus says to John's disciples, 'Look around – what did the prophet, Isaiah predict? The lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear. What more evidence do you need?'. And then he ends with those words, 'Blessed are those who don't stumble, who aren't offended, who don't lose faith in me'.

Jesus seems disappointed that John didn't get it.

If John was a tidal wave, then Jesus was a stream of compassion. That's not to say that he didn't talk about judgement and sin, he did. And he didn't mince his words, either. Jesus knew that if we had any hope of rescue, we had to first recognise and own the mess and the sin and the compromise and the contradiction in us. This is an unavoidable truth about each of us, but he also knew that it was not the whole truth. The whole truth is that we are actually images of the divine; capable of great love and loved exactly as we are and for who we are. And if we were never to change, we would still be loved exactly as we are and for who we are, remembering that love never leaves us exactly as we are.

A question I'd like us to reflect on this morning is that same question Jesus goes on to ask his audience, three times in fact; a question which gets to the heart of their, and our, motives in following something or someone. 'What did you go out to see?' In other words, when you travelled all that way into the desert to see this eccentric Baptist (and I've known one or two of those in my time!)... what exactly were you expecting?

‘A reed swayed by the wind?’ he asks. I’m not entirely sure what that means. Perhaps another way of saying someone without a backbone? Well, that’s definitely not the case. Or maybe it’s a metaphor – like a windsock indicating which way the divine winds of change are blowing?

Or, he goes on to ask, were you expecting to see ‘a man dressed in fine clothes?’ – well, if you know anything about John’s fashion sense, you’ll know he didn’t belong on no catwalk.

‘A Prophet?’ – definitely a prophet; someone who sees things as they really are, who shares something of God’s insight and perspective; someone who can, at times, speak for God.

‘What did you go out to see?’. ‘What were you expecting?’

As we approach this season of glad tidings and compulsory joy, what expectations do you have? Some of us will be excited, of course, can’t wait; counting the days. Others will have more mixed emotions because this season, like no other, surfaces all kinds of things. And some of us will just want it all to be over as soon as.

We invest so much in this one day of the year – and yet this one day can never completely live up to the hype, never fully meet our hopes and expectations. There is, however, I believe, an antidote to any anti-climax, and that is this essential season that leads us there; Advent.

Amid all that would distract us, Advent’s purpose is to slow us down, to make us stop and stare and re-evaluate what is actually important. Advent challenges us to look for the joy and the love and the human-kindness and the Christ that is already here, already now, in the ordinary and the small and the enough.

Advent is also a time for repentance. Not the most popular of words. Back to that truth about the mess we make. Jesus bled on about it because he knew that if we are to be free of it, we have to own up to it, name it, confess it, let it go, and find in the letting go the power to live differently. Repentance is that turning around; that changing of direction, that reorientation of our lives. It is a moving beyond our present mindset into a new way of thinking; a new way of being.

And from this new perspective, we, the so often deaf, can begin to hear ourselves and the still small voice of God within; from this new place we, the so often blind, can begin to open our eyes and see the wonder and holiness of life; from here we, the so often lame, can learn to walk with a new strength upon ground made holy by encountering Christ in others.

For me, that's as good a reason to gather like this at least once a week. We are too easily infected by consumer religion, where we go to church to have our needs met. And if the style of the music or the liturgy doesn't scratch where we itch, if this worship doesn't meet our expectations, then we need to remind ourselves that worship is not about us; it's about Him. And for those who commit regardless, then you, to appropriate Jesus' words, are 'Blessed' – more, you are a blessing because you are choosing to believe, in spite of evidence to the contrary, that Christ is among us.

We do not go to church to have our needs met; we go to worship Christ; to be Christ to others, and to find Christ in others... and to have the direction of our lives changed.

Advent teaches us that the meaning and the joy is to be found in being more fully present to each person, each moment, to ourselves, to our God, for it is here we will see Christ born.

Advent has the power to open our eyes to God-with-us in every moment, because God doesn't just rock up every 25<sup>th</sup> December; he comes disguised as our actual and ordinary and, yes, sometimes messy lives.