

Painting beauty in the darkness

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Those are the opening words of William Butler Yeats' 1919 poem, *The Second Coming*; words that are, then, over a century old but *could* be a poetic retelling of this morning's news.

For *Yeats*, the disturbing images of the disorientated falcon, the blood-dimmed tide, the drowning of the ceremony of innocence, were attempts to describe the disintegration, the freefall, of humanity through the devastation of World War I, the bloody beginnings of the Irish War of Independence, the tsunami of deaths in the 1918-1919 Spanish Flu Pandemic.

For *us*, they might hold a mirror to Israel/ Gaza where children are wrenched from their parents' arms, or rocked from their cribs by bombardment to be swaddled, then, only in rubble. Or they might conjure extremists hiding in plain sight on the benches of the House of Commons— 'full of passionate intensity' - or the vulnerability of some of the young people on the streets of our city, where honour and dishonour are a matter of life or death, and innocence is sacrificed in the fight for survival.

With Isaiah, then, don't we cry out to God this Advent Sunday? - 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down... to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!' (64.1-2)

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I wonder which phrase of Yeats' poem you find the most chilling; the phrase that won't quite let go of you? For me, it is this one: 'the best lack all conviction'; 'the best lack all conviction'. I find that deeply sobering because I recognise it's truth: that whilst the worst, as Yeats says, 'are full of passionate intensity', the best of us struggle to find our voices, to know how to respond to horror piling upon injustice upon trauma. There is an inertia born of overwhelm: 'The best lack all conviction.'

Instead, in our Gospel reading, Jesus says that we are to 'Keep awake'; to refuse to snuggle under the duvet of denial and disengagement (Mark 13.33-34); to hold to the truth that present pain does not deny the future promise of the one who is to come— the one we wait for, watch for.

But *then* what? - re-awakened to an uncomfortable sensitivity to the pain of this world, to a desperate longing for the world we're *promised*, how are we to *respond*; what are we to do in this *season* of Advent, in this *lifetime* of Advent, as we wait?

Our readings suggest two priorities: that we make a journey from the macro to the micro, from the universal to the individual, and that we do the work of the one for whom we wait, the one who is coming.

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Firstly, we are to keep alert to *ourselves*, to journey beyond lament for the brokenness of the *world* to the recognition of our *own* need of God's mercy, healing and tender parenting.

You might want to look for a moment at our reading from Isaiah 64 to trace what I'm suggesting. At the beginning of this oracle, of this prayer, Isaiah cries out to God to come and impose Godself upon God's *enemies*, upon the wayward, warring nations (64.1-2). This coming of God is to show *them*, to show *others*, to set *them* straight about what truly good power looks like.

Go deeper into the passage, though, and the self-righteousness of a witness demanding to see justice done dissipates; the perspective shifts from 'out there' to 'in here' and 'amongst us.'

And so, in verses 1-2, our *enemies* need to be shown who's boss, but in v6 'us' and 'them' disappear to be replaced by a recognition of shared humanity— 'we have *all* become like one who is unclean' ... '*all* our deeds are...filthy', 'we *all* fade like a leaf' because of our wrongdoing. The journey that starts with an appetite for the smiting of our enemies ends with an appeal for the mercy that *all* of us need. V9: 'Do not be exceeding angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity for ever. Now consider, we are all your people.'

Here in Coventry, we would say that this is the progression from 'Father, forgive *them*' - the words that Jesus says from the cross of those killing him (Luke 23.34) - from 'Father, forgive *them*' to simply 'Father, *forgive*', the refrain in our Litany of Reconciliation where we refuse to separate ourselves from sinful 'others', but acknowledge, with Isaiah, with Paul, that '*all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God' (Romans 3.23).

This is to be the first strand of our Advent wakefulness; that during this season— Lent's twin-sister— we become alert to all we have become and all that God longs for us to be; that we see ourselves in the context of the grace that God has for us, and turn again to the God who has never left us but from whom, in our shame, we have tried to hide. This Advent, wake up to yourself. Come out of hiding, not in fear, but in anticipation of restoration to wholeness.

Advent, then, is tenderly exploring our own woundedness; turning back to the one who can heal us, parent us. — Advent is tenderly exploring our own woundedness; turning back to the one who can heal us, parent us.

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Secondly, alert, awake, perhaps for the first time in a long time, we are to do the work of the one for whom we wait, the one who is coming.

For Yeats, the one making their approach is only menacing, horrifying, the embodiment of evil, 'slouching', he writes, towards Bethlehem, with a blank and pitiless gaze as the darkness deepens and deepens. The one for whom we wait is entirely different. He is 'the Son of Man' who will '[come] on

the clouds with great power and glory' (Luke 13.26); the one who has left us in charge, for a time, 'each with [our] work' until he should return (Luke 13.34).

What, then, is this work?

Shortly before Christmas 1888, Vincent Van Gogh was so tormented by his inner pain that he cut off part of his ear and was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Remarkably, it was there, in the room where he was held for his own safety, that Van Gogh painted 'Starry Night', where the midnight blue of the sky is swirled with the play of moon and stars, where light breaks out of darkness' prison and tells its defiant story; that the darkness has not overcome it (John 1.5). Incredible, that at the darkest time of the year, in the darkest period of his life, Van Gogh should paint such beauty, such possibility, such hope.

This, then, is *our* Advent work, too; in the darkness of the world we inhabit, to 'paint beauty'; to transform this midnight with the light of eternity; with deeds that pierce the darkness and give glimpses of the fullness of what we await—justice, mercy, comfort, peace, reunion, homecoming. In the context of the night in which we live, these might only be pin-pricks of light, but they will show that darkness is not absolute; will point to the Light who is coming, again, into the world (John 1.9).

Advent, then, is painting beauty in the darkness; piercing the darkness with light. — Advent is painting beauty in the darkness; piercing the darkness with light.

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This Advent, lament, cry out, at the pain of the world. Throw off inertia. Awaken your conviction.

And remember this, too:

Advent is tenderly exploring our own woundedness; turning back to the one who can heal us, parent us.

Advent is painting beauty in the darkness; piercing the darkness with light.

Amen.