

# Comment

An old friend and former Dominican brother wrote recently, saying, among other things, that as part of a process of personal politicisation, sadly he had felt compelled to abandon his commitment to the Church, and that the very thought of identifying himself in any meaningful association with right-wing Catholics turned his stomach. Not an uncommon sentiment by any means; many socialist groups, particularly in the north of England, can boast (should they actually want to, of course) a very high percentage of ex-Catholics in their ranks. People disgruntled, disgusted and dismayed by what they see as Catholic backsliding, reticence or reaction in social and political matters, and who, moreover, see very little possibility of their being grunted, (or indeed gusted or mayed), so long as stomach-turning right-wing Catholics find a home or even seem to flourish in the Church.

That left-wing Catholics *can* be committed members of the Church isn't only a matter of their being blessed with strong stomachs. For one thing, the fact of it being a Catholic church and not a sectarian elite with impeccable moral credentials necessarily means that it includes people who are selfish, greedy, lazy, mendacious, lustful, as well as those who support Mrs Thatcher. (Of course it is open to debate, hence the discussion in political theology, whether personal weakness and failure is the same as choosing to support political positions which are incompatible with being a follower of Jesus. There is, that is to say, a difference between sin which is the result of human weakness, and heresy for which the traditional penalty has been excommunication, and which in bloodier days Dominicans ruthlessly routed out. – The lady *is* for burning?)

Moreover, a growing number of Catholics would see their left-wing political commitment so nourished and sustained by their belief in Jesus Christ that, far from their association with the Church being the occasion of nauseous stomachs, they find in it their spiritual home. For such Christians, the season of Advent and Christmas is an appropriately exciting and challenging time, and it would be nicer to think that it is not just by chance that for quite a number of years now, a group of socialist Christians have gathered at the English Dominican Retreat Centre, Spode House, for the December Group meeting at the beginning of Advent. For one of the important things Christians celebrate in Advent is that God comes to us typically, not in elitist systems of moral rectitude, religious or political, but in human suffering and sin.

One of the functions of religion has been to help people to approach God by bridging the gap between our limited humanity and God's utter transcendence, between the historical particularity of our finitude and the timeless infinity and remoteness of the divine. In preparing us to celebrate Christmas, Advent also prepares us to celebrate the abolition of religion. The good news of the Incarnation is that we no longer require to grope for techniques to help us draw near to God. We cannot win our own righteousness, we cannot achieve union with the divine by our own efforts, but we don't have to. *He* has drawn near to us, *so* near to us as to share our very flesh and blood. The place we discover and give honour to God is in the man Jesus who shares our flesh and blood in total solidarity with broken humanity, and who expresses that solidarity in his particular concern for the poor, the weak and the underprivileged – "I came to seek and save the lost".

Such raw and vulnerable immediacy makes for unease. That is the scandal of the Incarnation. Such a scandal that our prevailing temptation is to find security from the immediacy and push God into the remoteness and inaccessibility of religion where He cannot bother or challenge us, and where He cannot through us, bother or challenge the world. Though we Christians may want God restored to the harmless neutrality of timeless infinity, God Himself will not leave us alone. Every year we have the season of Advent to remind us of the thousands of ways we have tried to resist the scandal of the Word becoming Flesh and dwelling among us, preferring Him to remain remote and therefore safe, preferring religion to Christ.

Advent says: Let Christmas happen! Let the Word become Flesh and dwell among us! Let the reconciling, forgiving, merciful, compassionate, liberating, loving Word of God find historical particularity among us *now*! There is a compelling urgency about Advent: let the Incarnation happen *now* before it is too late. 1980 hasn't been a particularly good year for the human race. Here in Britain, at any rate, it has been particularly dismal, with the predictable victims of the current crisis of capitalism receiving their predictable punishment. That has been blasphemous enough, but outweighing that is the increasing alarm at the problem of nuclear weapons and the associated madness of our rulers. We have before left until too late other problems of potential horror and indescribable human suffering – the rise of Nazism, for example. We must not let something similar happen again over nuclear weapons, but must let the Word of God become Flesh and dwell among us *now* before it is too late.

A very happy Christmas to everyone.

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