

Advent 1, Longing for encounter, 28th November, 2021

Well good morning, and happy new year! Today is of course the first Sunday of Advent and the first day of the Church calendar. This Advent we are exploring the theme of Encounter with God, and today I want to take a look at how we prepare ourselves for encounter.

Story: I did my undergraduate degree in marketing and management at Victoria University.

Looking back, I feel I did the whole degree for one paper. It was called Thinking Skills in Marketing with a lecturer called Peter November. One of the few lecturers whose names I actually remember. This paper was amazing - we would come to class having no idea what to expect. Each class he would teach us a particular heuristic, a tool for problem solving or self-discovery. We would go away and put the tools into practice that week and journal about our experience. The whole paper was assessed on these journals we wrote. One of the tasks he got us to do one week, was to go home from class each day by a different means or taking a different route, and writing about our experience. Every came back to class amazed at the incredible experiences they had – they bumped into friends that had been on their minds, inspiration struck for assignments, for some it felt like the universe had come into alignment. The point of the exercise was to notice the power of simply taking a step back from routine to notice more, to be aware. How taking a break from the monotonous, often mindless routine can open us up to the world around us, to encounter.

As I look through Scripture, I see that people often encounter God when things have taken a side step. When the individual has removed themselves or been removed from the hustle and bustle of life. This is why the wilderness, or being under the broom tree, are such common tropes of Divine encounter. Yes, occasionally God just breaks through the noise, and knocks the odd person off their horse. But more often than not, it seems that encounter

comes when the individual comes to desperate awareness of their need for God. When all of the walls we put up come crashing down, and we are confronted, sometimes painfully of that need. When we realise that it is only the One for whom our souls were created for that can truly satisfy that ache.

Our lectionary reading for today is one of the more apocalyptic passages of the Gospel. Jesus is responding to a question from his disciples about the timing of the destruction of the Temple. He warns them of the outward signs that will precede this and the coming of the Son of Man. He doesn't disregard the importance of keeping an eye on what's going on in the world, but in verse 34 he pivots, and he says to the disciples, "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the cares of this life."

But watch yourselves. That is, turn to, attend to, pay attention to, that your hearts are not burdened and weighed down. By:

- Dissipation: To squander the sensitivity of our heart Overindulgence, consuming to excess.
- Drunkenness: All the ways that we seek to numb ourselves, dull our senses.
- Cares of this life: all our anxieties and worries that pull our heart in all different directions.

Jesus is inviting the disciples to attend to the ways that they try to distract or numb themselves from that deep inner ache. As Augustine said, 'our heart is restless until it finds rest in God.' We find many ways to numb or distract ourselves from our restless heart, don't we? We are natural anaesthetists as Susan Pitchford writes in *Following Francis*. However she says, "This restless longing, this chronic dissatisfaction, are actually signs of the mercy of God, who implanted within us a yearning that, through all our woundings, constantly call us home."

The season of Advent is, as you may be aware, is meant to be a season of penitence, like Lent. Penitence seems very medieval, but it is a way to attend to ourselves and to our woundedness. This is not an occasion for inflicting more violence on ourselves, but to allow God to heal us. To encounter God, we must bring our whole selves, including our wounds. Our deep ache and longing to encounter that which can fully satisfy. Our wounds are entry ports for God and exposing them allows encounter with the healing wounds of Christ. This is why confession is a core aspect of coming to receive at the Eucharist. Susan Pitchford again writes, “a lifesaving blood transfusion requires both donor and recipient to be wounded.” By getting in touch with that deep ache, the yearning and longing, we prepare ourselves to encounter our wounded God, for Christ enters through humble doors, not closed ones.

But sometimes, through our day to day habits we dull that sense of longing don’t we? If you are anything like me, over these last 14 or so weeks of lockdown, you may have developed habits that are weighing down the heart. I know for myself, I got into the habit of staying up later and later into the night, watching Tv or playing video games as a way to have my own time from kids and escape the monotony of lockdown life. These habits are like taking the same way home from class each day, shutting my faculties to the possibility of encounter. If I am honest right now, I don’t think I could honestly pray, ‘Lord, I long for you.’ However, I can pray, “Lord, I long to long for you again.”

And while I probably can’t head off to the wilderness for a Divine encounter, I can take a step back from my current routines and habits and attend to myself to see where my heart may be getting weighed down by dissipation, drunkenness (or numbing) and the cares of this life. The practices of self-denial and simplicity are great ways to peel back those layers over our hearts that dull or distract us from that sense of longing. Or it may be simplicity is

needed how we spend our time. Or perhaps simplicity with regard to our inner-life, silencing those competing inner voices and demands that pull us in every which direction. Simplicity is attentiveness. Jesus invites us to watch, to attend to our hearts, to see what might be weighing us down, that we might prepare ourselves for encounter.

What would it look like this Advent to strip back those things which dull or distract? To not distract ourselves from our woundedness, that we may prepare our hearts to long. We are often aware of the places in our lives where self-discipline is needed. I also want to suggest that the daily examen, the practice of reviewing each day for signs of Grace and where Grace is needed could be helpful in this. Would you consider joining me this Advent to reflect on what might be stripped away, that which distracts, and that which dulls your heart from truly feeling that longing for encounter?

As we listen to the classic Advent song, O come, O come, Emmanuel, I invite you now to reflect on what you may have turned to over lockdown to dull or distract, that which has weighed down your heart from the ache of longing? So that we may prepare our hearts for encounter.