

Waiting in the Wilderness: Poets & the Prophet Isaiah
Advent Quiet Day , St. George's Halifax
9 December 2023
(Fr. David Curry)

Part One

Our Advent Quiet Day is a time of prayerful attention to what certain poets have to say about the mystery of God's coming to us and our coming to God as informed in some fashion by Isaiah, the great prophet of Advent. My hope is that these texts will deepen our understanding and strengthen our wills. Some passages from *Isaiah* and a selection of poems are offered for your quiet meditation and reflection.

Advent is our waiting in the wilderness upon the motions of God coming to us. What is that waiting? It is our watching and wanting, our looking and desiring; in short, it is prayer. What is the wilderness? It is, as *Isaiah* will show us, very much about ourselves, the wilderness of our hearts which contributes to various other forms of wilderness. The simple point is that the wilderness is not a place without humans; it is about a kind of *wildness* within us, the wilderness of sin.

The images of the wilderness in *Isaiah* look back to the story of Creation and the Fall in *Genesis* but with a wonderful kind of poignancy that moves our hearts and minds. "Let me sing for my beloved," *Isaiah 5* begins, "a love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard ... and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes."

What more was there to do for my
vineyard,
that I have not done in it?
When I looked for it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?
And now I will tell you
what I shall do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and briers and thorns shall grow
up;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.
For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah

are his pleasant planting;
and he looked for justice,
but behold bloodshed;
for righteousness,
but behold a cry!

The wilderness in us turns the paradise of God's creation into a wilderness outside us, the waste land of T.S.Eliot's poem by that name, itself shaped by the imagery of *Isaiah*. Yet the wilderness, too, is the place of prayer.

Prayer at once acknowledges what we want but as such do not have. Yet it assumes and anticipates that there is an ultimate good in which we participate now. Prayer is both *human desire* and *divine gift*, as Fr. Robert Crouse so concisely put it,¹ the divine gift which alone redeems our desires without which they are incomplete and partial, essentially dead and empty. "My soul is athirst for God, yea, even the living God," the psalmist reminds us.² Our sojourning in the wilderness is about our desire for wholeness, "like as the hart desires the water-brooks."³ Prayer and wilderness belong to our yearning for something absolute, for "here have we no continuing city"⁴ but "desire a better country, that is an heavenly," as *Hebrews* puts it.⁵ We are, as it were, sojourners in the wilderness longing and seeking for the true homeland of the spirit.

Our watching and wanting upon what comes from God to us is both the meaning of the Advent season in the wonderful pageant of God's Word coming as light and love and the doctrine of Advent in terms of Revelation which belongs to the whole of our life of prayer. What we wait upon as coming to us is always there, always God. The Advent pageant is about our constant attention to the eternal truth of God, "a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere" as the traditions of mystical theology say.⁶ T.S. Eliot's poem "East Coker" in *Four Quartets* begins with "In my beginning is my end" and ends with "in my end is my beginning,"⁷ expressing something of "the still point of the turning world" for "there is the dance,"⁸ the dance of the understanding. For everything "point[s] to one end, which is always present".⁹

¹ Robert Crouse, *Heavenly Avarice*, Address given in 1997 at the Lord is Nigh conference in Kelowna, BC.

² Psalm 42.2

³ Psalm 42.1

⁴ Hebrews 13.14

⁵ Hebrews 11.16

⁶ Hermes Trismegistus, among others, especially Nicholas of Cusa. The phrase is sometimes attributed to Empedocles. It appears in the *Book of the XXIV Philosophers* in the 12th century.

⁷ T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1952, "East Coker," *Four Quartets*, pp. 123 & 129.

⁸ Eliot, *ibid*, "Burnt Norton," *Four Quartets*, p. 119.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 118.

Prayer in all of its forms is essentially “*redire ad principia*”, as Lancelot Andrewes terms it, “a kind of circling” around and into the mystery of God. This is expressed in Psalm 85.¹⁰ It conveys the idea of a double turning: our turning to God and God turning to us but with the radical emphasis upon God as the one who turns us. “Turn us, O God, our Saviour ... Wilt thou not turn again and quicken us.” Likewise in Psalm 80, “Turn us again, O God;/ show the light of thy countenance, and we shall be whole”.¹¹

Advent is not the beginning of a linear series of events leading to a worldly utopia - the illusions of our attempts to make heaven on earth. “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee,” Augustine famously states,¹² but we often overlook the reason and the meaning of that restlessness. It is because God has made us for himself.¹³ Our disquiet is the awareness of separation from the truth of ourselves, on the one hand, and the seeking for wholeness in the overcoming of that separation, on the other hand.

Our desires find their fulfilment and end in God and yet that idea of prayer is what guides and directs our lives in pilgrimage. This is signalled beautifully, I think, in another passage from Augustine which captures the proper relation of things contemplative and things active in our lives. Our life, he reminds us, is always a *vita mixta*, a mixed life. *Otium sanctum quaerit caritas veritatis, negotium iustum suscipit necessitas caritatis.* “The love of truth seeks a holy quiet; the necessity of love accepts a righteous busyness.”¹⁴ Both are a kind of prayer in the interrelation and interdependence of the contemplative and the active, of Mary and Martha, in the integration of *caritas veritatis* and *necessitas caritatis*. The love of truth and the necessity of love all belong to prayer.

First Poetic Interlude: *Hymn to God the Father* - John Donne (1572-6131)¹⁵

- I. Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
 Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
 And do run still: though still I do deplore?
 When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
 For, I have more.
- II. Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
 Others to sin? and, made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
 A year, or two: but wallowed in, a score?
 When thou hast done, thou hast not done,

¹⁰ The Introit and Gradual Psalm for the Sunday Next Before Advent and one of the provisions for the Gradual Psalm for the First Sunday in Advent.

¹¹ The Introit Psalm for Advent II and the Gradual Psalm for Advent III.

¹² Augustine, *Confessions* 1. 1-5.

¹³ *Quia fecisti nos ad te*, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, Bk, XIX, xix.

¹⁵ John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, Penguin Classics, ed. A.J. Smith, 1996, p.348.

For I have more.

III. I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thy self, that at my death thy son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, thou hast done,
I fear no more.

In the 1633-1669 editions of Donne's poems, this poem comes at the end. His great and laudatory biographer, Izaak Walton, suggests that it was composed during one of Donne's illnesses in 1623. Other manuscripts provide a slightly different version entitled 'To Christ'. But John Hilton (1599-1657), a composer and contemporary of Donne, set the poem to music under the title 'A Hymn to God the Father' during Donne's lifetime. The poem is partly a play on his name 'Donne/done' and on his wife's name, Ann More, 'More/more', 'More/No more', but more profoundly it is a meditation on prayer that arises out of the wilderness of sin and suffering. "Wilt thou forgive?" he asks God out of the consciousness of the besetting sins which belong to our disquiet and unease, a kind of *schlechte unendlichkeit* (with apologies to Hegel), bad infinity. Such is the bad infinity of our desires in endless disarray. They leave us bereft in the wilderness, longing and lusting after this thing and that thing which are but the shadows of our true desire for the good. The true infinity of God's love and mercy is revealed to us in the shining of the everlasting Son. In him is the redemption of desire even in the experience of suffering and the fear of death.

This complements Donne's sonnet "What if this present were the world's last night?" which bids us contemplate the picture of Christ crucified and to consider whether that image frightens us or condemns us only to conclude with strong emphasis, that "no, no." No to that countenance frightening us and no to what is remembered as heard from the first word of the Cross condemning us because it is about forgiveness. Instead the image of the crucified Christ is a "beauteous form" which "assures a piteous mind."¹⁶ Here his fear is quieted by the prospect of our rest in God through the realisation that what Christ has done he has *done* both for Donne and for us all.¹⁷

Isaiah is "the most evangelical of the prophets," a seventeenth century Anglican Divine, Anthony Sparrow, observes. Images and phrases from *Isaiah* have shaped the Church's understanding of the mystery and the wonder of the Incarnation. For that reason *The Book of Isaiah* has been read in the Offices for centuries upon centuries and continues to be read at the Daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer and in the Sunday Offices throughout the Advent and Christmas seasons and into Epiphany in the classical Prayer Book tradition. Lessons from *Isaiah* are prominent too in the wonderful service of Advent

¹⁶ John Donne, *Divine Meditations*, Sonnet # 13, *ibid*, p. 314.

¹⁷ Thus, it is not about waiting for something to happen but about waiting upon what has happened and what belongs to the eternity of God; our waiting is our active attention to what is eternal which gives meaning to our lives.

Lessons and Carols, instituted at King's College Chapel, Cambridge, just after the devastations of the First World War. There is, it seems, a prophetic conjunction between *Isaiah* and the central themes of the Christian Gospel. And not just in Advent; the suffering servant songs in *Isaiah* shape the Christian imaginary about the crucifixion during Holy Week.

The Book of the Prophet Isaiah spans at least two centuries and while it is all collectively *The Book of Isaiah*, it is probably the work of several writers over several centuries from the latter half of the 8th century to the latter half of the 6th century BC. The scholarly consensus, more or less, is that *The Book of Isaiah* is best appreciated as three books or one book having three distinct sections: *First Isaiah*, chapters 1-39; *Deutero-Isaiah*, chapters 40-55; and, *Trito-Isaiah*, chapters 56-66. Readings from each of these three divisions of the book figure prominently in the Christian Church's understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation.

Two passages, *Isaiah 11. 1-3a, 4a, 6-9* and *Isaiah 60. 1-6*, will be the focus for this session, and two other passages, *Isaiah 7. 10-15* and *Isaiah 40. 1-11* at our second session.

Isaiah 11. 1-3a, 4a, 6-9 provides a twofold reflection upon the *Messianic King* and the idea of *Paradise Restored*. The passage has had an enormous influence upon the theological understanding of our humanity and upon the idea of Creation as Paradise as well as contributing to the Christian understanding of the person of Jesus Christ. The idea of the Messianic King is associated with King David. "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse," it begins, recalling us to the family tree or lineage of King David, the King who united the unruly tribes of Israel in the worship of God centred in Jerusalem, Zion. There is a sense of universality in the image of what comes out of the stem of Jesse since it recalls *The Book of Ruth*. Ruth, the Moabitess, is a non-Israelite who is the great-grandmother of David.

In Isaiah's vision, "the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him." The Holy Spirit of God conveys the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit upon the Messiah, the anointed one who is thought of as the saviour of the world. The gifts are spiritual principles which speak to the integrity of our humanity, to the unity of heart and mind and which are properties or qualities of the Messiah in us. The Hebrew text, as we have it from a much later period than the Greek translation, names six gifts but the *Septuagint* itself speaks of the seven gifts of the Spirit.

But what are these so-called gifts, these qualities of soul that participate or share in the divine nature itself? "The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord." The *Septuagint*, probably out of a sense of the rhetorical patterns of Greek poetry, couples "piety" or devotion with "knowledge" and makes "the fear of the Lord" a kind of concluding principle. The fear of the Lord refers to honouring or worshipping God.

They are all intellectual and spiritual gifts which come from God and speak to heart and mind. That is significant with respect to theological anthropology, namely, how we

understand our humanity in the sight of God. Critical to that theological understanding is the idea of the integration of heart and mind, suggested in the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit. That these gifts are directly associated with the Messiah signify that they ultimately derive from the Word and the Spirit of God and unite us with God. In other words, these spiritual gifts are principles that come from God to us and that speak to the greater dignity and truth of our humanity as seen in the sight of God.

In the Church's Advent reading of *Isaiah*, these gifts that speak to the spiritual qualities of the Messiah are ascribed to the coming of Christ. For Israel, the idea of the Messiah admits of a number of possibilities; principally the idea of a king who will restore Israel to prominence and rule as was partly accomplished in David's reign. In the Christian understanding that political theme is inverted. The kingdom that Christ brings is not of this world but signifies a larger sense of redemption, namely, the redemption of the world and our humanity to God.

The passage proceeds to emphasise the qualities of *righteous judgement* that belong to the Messianic kingship. In a way, it anticipates the "*hungering and thirsting*" for righteousness in the *Beatitudes*. It reminds us of the divine basis of all forms of social and political justice. They have to be rooted and grounded in God's righteousness, a righteousness which acts as a powerful check upon the incomplete forms of human righteousness. We forget this at our peril. The *necessity of love* is grounded in the *love of truth*.

The theme of the righteousness of the Messianic reign carries over into the picture of *paradise restored*. We are given a vision of what that righteousness looks like. It is imaged in terms of the harmony of the natural world and the harmony of man and nature but ultimately as dependent upon God's harmony with his creation restored to truth and righteousness. The sequence of images is powerful and suggestive. Harmony reigns in place of "nature red in tooth and claw," to use Tennyson's great phrase,¹⁸ the dog-eat-dog world of division and dominion. Instead, as *Isaiah* envisions, the wolf shall dwell with the lamb rather than eat the lamb! This passage provoked the modern prophet and philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche, to heights of rhetorical excess influenced by his reading of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. He emphasises the will to power over the struggle for survival. The wolf shall devour the lamb; not dwell with the lamb in peace and harmony. It is a different vision that leads to abuse and destruction, to darkness and despair, to a world of will without reason. The wilderness of modernity.

"They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain," *Isaiah* concludes, "for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." This vision challenges us and counters the divisions in our hearts and world. It is a contemplative vision that recalls us to the goodness of creation and of our humanity within that order. In the motions of God's Word coming to us we are awakened to hope and peace, to joy and love that are found in God. Such is the redemption of human desire and the hope of the redemption of the world. It shows us the meaning of Bethlehem, the very place to

¹⁸ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, LVI

which Advent brings us. Bethlehem in all of the rich imagery of that crowded and humble stable scene is *paradise restored* in the birth of the child-king. That story and scene is enlarged by our reading of *Isaiah*.

Isaiah 60.1-6 forms one of the Church's canticles, the scriptural songs of praise that complement the readings of Scripture at Morning and Evening Prayer; the *Surge Illuminare*.

"Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." This passage from *Trito-Isaiah* strikes all of the notes of Advent expectancy and anticipation. It catapults us into the mystery of the Word and Son of God as *Light*. It opens us out to the profound ramifications and significance of Christ's holy birth. For in the birth of Christ, there is more than *paradise restored* in terms of the harmony of nature, man and God. There is the further idea of the gathering together of all of the forms of our humanity. And there is the note of universality: "the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising" for "the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory."

Light is one of the great and grand themes of Advent. The light is the light of God that breaks into the darkness of our wilderness world. Advent is about the Light of God coming to us, the Light which the darkness cannot comprehend, the Light which is life and grace, truth and mercy. In the Christian understanding, that Light is Christ, the Word and Son of the Father who comes as the Light of the World. It is only the darkness of our refusals that stands in the way; such is our way, not God's way.

In the great Christmas Gospel, *John 1. 1-14*, this is made explicitly clear. There is the coming of God's Word, Son and Light to our dark world and there is either our refusal or our embrace of that Word, the one who is Word, Son and Light, the Word made flesh. "He came unto his own and his own received him not." These words should make us tremble and shake as we saw in Donne's "Hymn to God the Father." As he remarks elsewhere, "God will not save us without our wills but only through our wills." There has to be our engagement with the God who engages us, such is the redemption of our desires. Such is prayer.

Second Poetic Interlude: *Prayer (1)* - George Herbert (1593-1633)¹⁹

Prayer the churches banquet, Angels age,
Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;
Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's towre,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things heare and fear;

¹⁹ George Herbert, *The Poems of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson, Oxford, 1961, *Prayer (1)*, p. 44.

Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices; something understood.

Herbert's sonnet is a wonderful kaleidoscope of images that gather together a whole range of metaphors that belong to prayer. It may seem at first to be little more than a pile of descriptive metaphors, a *systrophe*, to use a technical term, what Louis MacNeice called the poem's "breathless accumulation of metaphorical images" even as "it works to capture something of the landscape of prayer".²⁰ It has no main verb; what is implied is the verb 'is'. Prayer *is* each of the images but as finally resolved in what is not an image exactly but "something understood," suggesting something substantial in the images, something which stands under each of them in their meaning. The images canvass things Scriptural and philosophical, heavenly and earthly, intellectual and sensual, sacramental and everyday, natural and domestic, exotic and esoteric; in short, prayer encompasses the whole universe but is concentrated in our hearts and souls. It is a marvellous expression of the soul's journey to God in relation to the world and to ourselves as a community of prayer. Like Isaiah's gifts of the spirit, Herbert's poem insists on the integration of heart and mind and on the gathering into unity in God of the whole created order. "Man well drest" refers, I think, to Augustine's teaching to look at the Creed and see ourselves in it as in a mirror. To dress ourselves in what comes to us from God speaks to who we are in God's sight. Ultimately, the metaphors and images of prayer are united as "something understood," a gathering into unity and wholeness. Such is our waiting in the wilderness: "the soul in paraphrase, the heart in pilgrimage" all belonging to "something understood."

Part 2

A central figure in the wilderness landscape of Advent is Mary, the Virgin Mother, contradictory terms which already point to a larger view of what it means to be human precisely through the idea of our being made for God. It is not too much to say that the Church in Advent is simply Mary in Holy Waiting; in short, in prayer. It is not by accident that the story of the Annunciation is read in Advent, particularly during the Advent Ember Days. "In the sixth month," Luke tells us, "the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a Virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the Virgin's name was Mary."

Luke's account of the Annunciation prefaces his narrative of Christ's birth. It complements Matthew's infancy narrative about how the "birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise," noting that Mary was found with child of the Holy Ghost "before [she and

²⁰ Mark Oakley, *My Sour-Sweet Days: George Herbert and the Journey of the Soul*. SPCK, 2019, p. 24

Joseph] came together,” and concluding parenthetically that “all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a Virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a Son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.” Matthew is quoting *Isaiah* 7. 14 from the Greek Septuagint directly, adding only the interpretation of the name, “Emmanuel”. Luke, too, is echoing *Isaiah*, changing only that his name shall be called Jesus. In the Christian understanding, Jesus is Emmanuel.

The King James’ translation of *Matthew* 1. 23, where Matthew quotes from *Isaiah*, varies a little from that of *Isaiah* 7.14 in an interesting and instructive way. The King James translation of *Isaiah* 7.14 is “behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son.” In *Matthew* 1.23, it is “behold, a Virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a Son.” In Luke’s account of the Annunciation, Gabriel announces to Mary that “behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a Son” which is closer to the translation of *Isaiah* but with the addition of “in thy womb” which is more faithful, in a literal way, to the Greek. The word “womb” is part of the Greek expression for being pregnant, which means, literally, “to have in the womb.” Luke has used the Greek verb “to conceive” in his account and this word, in particular, has carried over into the rich devotional traditions of song and motet in the Latin West, for instance, in the “*Ecce virgo concipiet*,” set to a great number of different musical settings including one by William Byrd (1543-1623). These variations bring out something of the special wonder of the Annunciation and the role of *Isaiah*’s prophecy in shaping that devotional and doctrinal understanding.

“To have in the womb”, “to be with child”, “to conceive.” These are all ways of capturing the marvel and wonder of the Christmas story of Christ’s birth. The word which carries the greatest weight of prophetic meaning is the word, “virgin”, capitalised in the King James translation of Matthew’s quotation from *Isaiah* though not capitalised in the KJV translation of *Isaiah* itself. This one word is a critical feature of the doctrinal and devotional understanding of the Incarnation. And yet, it has been the occasion of considerable controversy and endless debate within and without the exegetical community. Why? Because the Hebrew word can equally be rendered as young maiden or young woman or girl. This has led some to discredit and dismiss the idea of the Virgin Birth altogether.

There are two points to be observed here. First, the Greek translation of the Hebrew is actually older than the Hebrew texts which we have from the ninth century AD, the so-called Masoretic text, and while there is no reason to suspect that the Hebrew text used by the Greek translators was all that different in this case, the word, virgin, used by the Greek translators does not traduce the Hebrew “*almah*,” especially in the context of *Isaiah*. Secondly, it is not as if the whole understanding of the virgin birth stands simply upon a kind of Old Testament proof-texting; it belongs to a deeper reflection upon human redemption and upon the meaning of Jesus as the Divine Saviour. This challenges, too, it seems to me, the reductionist tendencies and naturalistic assumptions of our world and day by opening out to us the greater power of God. That is part of the context of *Isaiah*’s

prophecy to Ahaz who trusted in the power of the King of Assyria rather than the power of God.

It is, as former Pope Benedict XVI said, in a thoughtful treatment of the infancy narratives, “a word in waiting;”²¹ in short, a word which awaits its fuller meaning and purpose and which is found in the story of Christ’s coming and birth.

We are able to date this word from *Isaiah* with unusual precision to the year 733 BC and to the period of the Assyrian King, Tiglath-Pileser III, who was asserting his dominion over the Syro-Palestinian states. The Syrian King, Rezin, and Pekah, King of Israel, had wanted Ahaz, the King of Judah, to be part of a coalition against the Assyrian power but Ahaz, sensing the greater power of the Assyrian empire, had refused so they planned to wage war against him. He had countered this by the political cunning of entering into a protection treaty with the Assyrian king. From Isaiah’s standpoint this meant putting his trust in the power of a king rather than in the power of God and submitting to an unholy power and worshipping their gods. As Benedict observes “what was at stake here was ultimately not a political problem, but a question of faith.”²²

In Isaiah’s prophecy, God tells Ahaz that he has nothing to worry about from the “two tails of these smoking firebrands,” (*Is.* 7. 4), referring to Syria and Israel, but adding that “if ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established” (*Is.* 9). The Lord speaks again to Ahaz telling him to ask him for a sign whether from the depths of hell, we might say, or from the heights of heaven so as to convince him about the power of God. This, too, seems to me remarkable. It speaks to the nature of God’s engagement with our humanity. Faith cannot be blind faith. God wants Ahaz to see and recognize the divine power and truth which is greater than our political machinations and worldly schemes. He seeks our response to truth, our active willing of the truth of God, we might say. Ahaz responds with what is really a kind of mock piety, saying ‘I will not put God to the test,’ in effect “indicat[ing] that he does not want to be disturbed in his Realpolitik.”²³ The contrast between Ahaz and Mary could not be greater; the one says ‘no’, the other, ‘yes’ to God.

But what, then, of this sign that God insists upon to the calculating and cynical Ahaz? How is it to be understood? Benedict refers to four interpretations of this passage only to conclude that they are all ambiguous and inconclusive: first, a type of the Messiah which at best could only be anticipated and is a later theme; second, God with us as signifying a son of Ahaz, which seems improbable in the context; third, one of the sons of the prophet Isaiah himself which also seems a stretch; and finally, the fourth theory, that the term Emmanuel has a collective significance as referring to the new Israel, the “*almah*”, the virgin, as symbolic of Zion. None of these approaches has any kind of historical resonance in the actual context. Thus the suggestion that it is “a word in waiting,” which

²¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *The Infancy Narratives: Jesus of Nazareth* (Image, Crown Publishing Group, Random House, 2012).

²² Pope Benedict XVI, *Infancy Narratives*, p. 47.

²³ Benedict, *Infancy Narratives*, p. 48

is exactly how Matthew, and the “entire Christian tradition” with him, sees it. “Though Jesus is not actually named Emmanuel, nevertheless he is Emmanuel, as the entire history of the Gospels seeks to demonstrate. This man – they tell us – in his very person is God’s being-with-men. He is true man and at the same time God, God’s true Son.”²⁴ We should recall, once again, that Luke has echoed *Isaiah* almost verbatim in his account of the Annunciation, changing only that the name of the child shall be called Jesus.

“A word in waiting.” It is an intriguing concept. It belongs to Benedict’s overall approach to the mystery of the Incarnation as seen through the infancy narratives. He argues that we are dealing with something historical and theological which then demands an account, a reason or an explanation. Thus, things from the past, ambiguous and obscure in their own context, suddenly take on a whole new meaning and understanding. That happens because of the encounter with something that is new, revolutionary, and transforming; in short, the reality of the Incarnate Word and Son of the Father who is Emmanuel. Thus, *Isaiah* shapes our understanding of the deeper mystery of God’s engagement with our humanity. The sign for Ahaz has become a sign for the whole world. Put your trust in God not in man.

Third Poetic Interlude: *Annunciation* - (John Donne, 1572-1633)²⁵

*Salvation to all that will is nigh,
That All, which always is All everywhere,
Which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear,
Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,
Loe, faithful Virgin, yields himself to lie
In prison, in thy womb; and though he there
Can take no sin, nor thou give, yet he’will wear
Taken from thence, flesh, which death’s force may try.
Ere by the spheres time was created, thou
Wast in his mind, who is thy Son, and Brother,
Whom thou conceiv’st, conceiv’d; yea thou art now
Thy maker’s maker, and thy Father’s mother,
Thou hast light in dark; and shutst in little room,
Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.*

The sonnet, in the Italian or Petrarchan style which Donne prefers, is divided into an *octet* and a *sestet*. It is part of a sequence of seven sonnets entitled *La Corona* in which the last line of each sonnet is the first line of the succeeding sonnet and thus completes a circle, a crown. The sequence is a poetic summary of the essential doctrinal moments in the story of Christ. “Annunciation” is the title of the second sonnet in the sequence and provides a most focused and theologically intense meditation on Mary and her role in the economy of salvation.

²⁴ Benedict, *Infancy Narratives*, p. 48

²⁵ John Donne, *Holy Sonnets, La Corona, Annunciation*, *ibid.*, p. 306.

“Salvation to all that will is nigh,” it begins. Salvation, our wholeness or completeness, is near at hand to all that want it. The first ‘all’ refers to everyone who wills, all who desire wholeness or completeness; in short, the ultimate good which we all seek even if we are utterly mistaken about what it is, owing to the bad infinity of our desires and the confusions of our minds which attempt to usurp or obscure the true infinity of God. In the second line, the “all” is now identified with God, “that all, which always is all everywhere.” This signals the ubiquity and eternity of God but also that “all” in which our “all,” meaning all of us, find our good through prayer, through our willing and seeking that good. Herbert plays with the same conceit “Where is All, there All should be.”²⁶ That good is greater than all our misconceptions and sins, “which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear.” The reference is to Christ who “was made sin for us, who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5.21). “Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,” referencing Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross.

These apostrophes to God in Christ lead us to the subject or addressee of the sonnet, Mary. “Lo, faithful Virgin, yields himself to lie/ In prison, in thy womb.” God the All who is always all everywhere yields himself to be in her womb. Her womb is likened to a prison, an enclosed space. The sonnet plays on the concept of *hortus conclusus*, an enclosed garden as in monastic establishments (and later extended to academic institutions), drawing upon imagery from *The Song of Songs* (4.12). It also echoes the *Te Deum Laudamus* in the English Prayer Book: “thou didst not abhor the Virgin’s womb”.²⁷

This leads to a remarkable theological concept that concludes the *octet*, namely, the idea of the immaculate conception of Mary: “and though he there/ Can take no sin, nor thou give, yet he ‘will wear/ Taken from thence, flesh, which death’s force may try.” Though not a doctrine required to be believed as *de fides* for Anglicans since it is not found *per se* in the Scriptures, there were those in the English Church who were comfortable with such teachings though not as required to be believed. Herbert’s poem “To all Angels and Saints” speaks warmly and devotionally about Mary even as he says he cannot address her in prayer, effectively saying what he cannot say. “Thou art the holy mine, whence came the gold,/ the great restorative for all decay/ In young and old; /Thou art the cabinet where the jewell lay.”²⁸ The idea is that the purity of Mary belongs to the purity or sinlessness of Christ, “that pure one opening purely that pure womb which regenerates men unto God and which he himself made pure,” as Irenaeus so beautifully puts it.

These paradoxes of relationship are intensified further in the *sestet* in an even more complex theological register. “Ere by the spheres time was created, thou/ Wast in his mind.” Before the foundation of time and world, Mary is in the mind of God, the God “who is thy son, and brother;” Christ is her son but as human he is also brother, referencing our common humanity. But in a further extravagance of language and thought, Christ “Whom thou conceiv’st, conceived.” Mary conceives Christ in the womb

²⁶ Herbert, *The Invitation*, *ibid*, p. 171

²⁷ Cdn. BCP, p. 8

²⁸ George Herbert, ‘To All Angels and Saints’, *ibid*, p. 69

whom Christ conceives intellectually in mind, playing on the double sense of conceiving physically and mentally. The paradox of relationships is made even greater: "yea, thou art now /Thy maker's maker, and thy father's mother". The paradox of redemption gathers us to God in his eternal truth and life. The sonnet in all of its intensity ends on the Advent theme of light overcoming darkness: "Thou' hast light in dark; and shutt'st in little room." In the darkness of Mary's womb lies the light of God, the light of the world, "*Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.*" The finite and the infinite, the human and the divine, are clearly distinguished and at the same time united. The sonnet shows us the wholeness which we seek as found in God through Mary.

Our last passage from *Isaiah* is *Isaiah 40.1-11*. It may be among the more familiar passages from *Isaiah*, for no other reason, perhaps, than the power of Handel's *Messiah*. It marks the beginning of *Deutero-Isaiah*, what is also sometimes called *The Book of the Consolation of Israel*. The opening chapter is magnificent and resounding in its phrases and patterns of glory. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God." God speaks to us and he speaks to us about the only strength and comfort that there is, namely, *his* strength and comfort. He speaks to us in the wilderness.

The passage is rich in its allusions to Advent. It speaks of redemption, to be sure, but in terms of pardon and grace, of meaningful sacrifice and suffering; things which should give us pause to ponder. Pondering upon the Words of God is a Marian theme. Being like Mary means pondering in our hearts, too, all the words which were said about her child. Advent awakens us to the power of God's Word coming to us and *Isaiah* is the great messenger of that Word. Here he speaks of "a voice cry[ing] in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord" and immediately we are catapulted into the ministry and mission of John the Baptist, the other great figure of the spiritual landscape of Advent "Art thou he that should come or do we seek for another," as we hear from *Matthew 11.3* on The Third Sunday in Advent.

Jesus' response to John's question speaks of the fulfillment of the Messianic Kingdom in himself. "Go and show John again, those things which ye do hear and see, the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them" (*Mt. 11. 4*). What do we hear and see? The vision of our humanity redeemed and restored but only by virtue of the Word of God Incarnate; the Word of God with us is Jesus Christ.

This is what *Isaiah 40.1-11* indicates to us and in so doing shapes our thinking about the radical nature of God's engagement with our humanity and, indeed, with the whole of the created order, for "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low" (vs. 4). God comes in the power of his almighty word; there is a complete and utter contrast between the eternity of God and the passing and fading nature of this world. "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth" (vs. 7). So, too, with us, and yet, in complete and utter contrast to the character and the vagaries of the finite world, "the word of our God shall stand for ever" (vs. 8). That is the Word which comes to us in the humanity of Christ. The Word which comes to us is the Word which ever is.

Isaiah signals one of the great but often overlooked themes of Advent. It is a penitential season, to be sure, a time when we intentionally recall the many and varied forms of human darkness. But it is also a time of rejoicing, of rejoicing not in ourselves and in the pretensions of our accomplishments, but in God's being with us whose Word abides forever, and who leads us like a Shepherd for we are his sheep.

Isaiah 40 offers great consolation. It opens us out to the deep care of God for our humanity for this is the great wonder of Advent, the wonder of Advent in *Isaiah*. "He shall feed his flocks like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young" (vs. 11). The Advent in *Isaiah* opens out to us the theme of God's providential care for his people, to the meaning of the one who comes for our good and blessing. We can look for no other but we can begin to understand that he has come to bring redemption and begin, even more, to see something of what that redemption looks like in ourselves and others. The Advent in *Isaiah* opens us out to the power and strength of the God whose "word shall stand for ever." We can only pray with Mary, "be it unto me according to thy word."

Fourth Poetic Interlude: *God's Grandeur* - Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Hopkins' poem "God's Grandeur" provides us with another way to think about our waiting in the wilderness. It challenges some of the features that belong to the eco-apocalypticism of our times, the impending sense of catastrophism and endism. In a way, the poem is a strong affirmation of the essential goodness of creation in spite of human waywardness and the enterprises of exploitation. It recalls the Providence of God that is greater than the miseries and drudgeries of our technocratic world.

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God." The world is more than just something to be manipulated and exploited by us and thus turned into a waste land or wilderness. The world is the cloak of God's glory, as Calvin puts it, in a phrase that captured the

imagination of Marylynn Robinson, and which complements Hopkins' poem. It offers us hope but it also provides the proper orientation and attitude of prayer by recalling us to God and to our life in God. It requires attention.

For over and against "the grandeur of God" in creation, there is our indifference and inattention. "Why do men then not reckon his rod?" Why do we not think or reckon upon the rule of God who is the God of all creation? The poem is explicit about our relation to the world through industrialization and various forms of exploitation. "Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;/ And all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil;/ and wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil is bare now/ Nor can foot feel, being shod." It is a powerful statement about our disconnect from God's creation and world and conveys a sense of discontent and anxiety in our separation from the world which we have made into a wilderness. But that is not the end of the poem as the second stanza makes clear.

Yet "for all this, nature is never spent." There is something greater and grander about nature than us in our use and misuse of the world. The poem reminds us, like *Isaiah*, about the one who is the Lord of the vineyard of creation and in so doing helps us to reclaim something of his prophetic vision and the ways in which poets have reflected upon it. It is a counter to our pretensions about ourselves and one another that result in animosity and division, resentment and envy, not to mention a sense of despair and hopelessness. "There lives," he says in a beautiful phrase, "the dearest freshness deep down things," for even as the lights are going out "off the dark West" then there is the morning that springs forth eastward, the light that displaces the darkness. Why? "Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/ World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."

Prayer is not simply about our desiring. It is about the redemption of desire through the one who comes into the darkness and wilderness of our lives and our "bent world." Prayer is our attentiveness to the motions of God coming to us in Word and Sacrament, in all of the things that belong to the "churches banquet, angels age", all the things that belong to the "soul in paraphrase, the heart of pilgrimage". It means to be attentive to what comes to us as "something understood" in and through the wilderness of our hearts and world..

Fr. David Curry
Advent Quiet Day Addresses
St. George's, Halifax
December 9th, 2023

"Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart"

We will hear these words in Christmastide, on the Octave Day of Christmas. What things does Mary keep and ponder in her heart? All the things that are said about the child Christ. By extension we, too, are bidden to ponder all the things that belong to the

mystery of Christ. Such is part of the meaning of our Advent Quiet Day. We are meant to be like Mary. We can't think about Christ apart from her. She is an essential part of the mystery and meaning of the Incarnation and of our waiting in the wilderness

Pondus meum amor meus. My love is my weight. A powerful phrase from Augustine, it has shaped the patristic, mediaeval, and reformation churches' understanding of human redemption. Augustine's image captures a significant theological theme which speaks to the "inarticulate loneliness" (to use Alistair MacLeod's phrase) of a culture which has abandoned God and finds itself adrift and isolated. Such is our wilderness.

Mary in Advent is Mary in Holy Waiting. What defines Mary is her waiting upon the will of God. Far from a kind of passive acquiescence, Mary's waiting is an holy activity, a kind of attentiveness to the pageant of God's Word revealed in the Law and the Prophets and now, on Angel's wings, it seems, opening out to us the wonder and the marvel of God's coming to us through her. To what extent are we in her? For Mary, in Irenaeus' poignant and potent phrase *is* the pure womb which gives birth to that purity which Christ himself has made pure: "that pure one opening purely that pure womb which regenerates men unto God and which he himself made pure."

It is impossible to think of Mary apart from Christ; she is quietly and patiently with us in our meditations and thoughts. For the Church in prayer is essentially Marian. Mary is an inescapable feature of the landscape of Advent. She plays a critical and crucial role in our understanding of Christ's coming to us as *Emmanuel*, God with us. Through Mary we begin to discover how our humanity is totally and inescapably bound up with the will of God towards us; in short, his advent.

What is the weight which defines us? The term is analogous to Aristotle's doctrine of natural place - things tend to where they belong - but as extended to the soul. What do our souls desire? The first question is the first utterance of direct speech by Jesus in John's Gospel. "What do you seek?" he asks the disciples of John the Baptist (Sunday Next Before Advent), even as later he will ask those who were in the wilderness, "what went ye out for to see?" (Third Sunday in Advent). Our seeking is our longing, our hoping and looking for something more. Advent speaks to that longing and looking. Jesus' question prompts a question in return by the disciples: "Master, where dwellest thou?" The implication is one of wanting to be with the one in whom all our souls' desires are found and fulfilled.

The longing and the looking speak to our recognition of the incompleteness of our humanity apart from God. But how and in what way is God with us? Advent signals all the ways of God's being with us: in the Word as Law and Prophecy, in the Word as Judgment and Truth, but most wondrously in the Word made flesh. And, yet, even then in the pageant of his coming in the flesh the question about who he is. "Who is this?" the city is moved to say in the Gospel for The First Sunday of Advent. The answer is that he is King and Saviour who redeems the desires of our humanity signalled even in the cleansing of the temple from all our misuse and abuse of the things of God.

How is God with us in the quiet darkness of Advent? *In ventris* and *in mentis*. In the womb and the mind of Mary, the ancient Fathers say, awaiting the fullness of time, the time of her delivery of the one conceived in her by the Holy Ghost, conceived in mind and only so in womb. Her Annunciation is his conception.

In the project of Advent, we are reminded, especially in the Advent Ember days, of the Annunciation. The Annunciation forms a central part, too, of the carols and hymns of the Advent and Christmas season. We cannot think of God being with us in the intimacy of the humanity of Christ without the role of Mary in the working out of human redemption. Yesterday we commemorated her conception which, though unmentioned in the Scriptures, nonetheless belongs to our theological reflection about her purpose and role in the story of Christ. It signifies the divine purpose for our humanity. She shows us the true vocation of our humanity.

She is the pure vessel of our Lord's pure humanity and represents to us the vision of our humanity in its truth *qua* human. What is that truth? "Be it unto me according to thy Word." Her '*yes to God*' is about her free-willing participation in God's good will and purpose for our humanity. Her '*yes to God*' reverses the presumption of Adam and Eve, the presumption of our sin and all the pageant of woe that the Fall entails. Her '*yes to God*' recalls what belongs to the truth of our humanity rather than its untruth. Sin and death, misery and sorrow, are all negatives. They belong to the lie of our humanity. Mary recalls us to the truth of our humanity which is found in knowing and loving the will of God *for us* which is always about his knowing and loving at work *in us*. That Word is eternal; all our longing and looking presuppose the eternity and truth of God's Word as what defines and dignifies our humanity. Mary's response reveals the simple truth of our humanity. It is found in our willing what God wills for us in our embrace of the divine truth without which our humanity is utterly incomplete. "Be it unto me according to thy Word," Mary says, and so must we.

Such is the watchful waiting of the Advent season. We wait upon the pageant of God's Word coming to us in Law and Prophecy, in Gospel and Sacrament, and in the myriad of ways in which the truth of God appears in the little things of kindness and sacrifice, of service and care towards one another. All because of Mary's waiting upon God's Word, her waiting in Advent for the birth of the Child Christ, and our waiting for the appearing of the One who takes flesh through her.

Her waiting is the highest and truest activity of our humanity. To conceive is more than to receive and other than to deceive, as Andrewes notes. Her '*yes to God*' is an intellectual and spiritual response to the divine initiative and it defines her being and, indeed, the being of the Church. God becomes man through her active willing of God's will, the active yielding of her whole being to the divine will and purpose. That active willing is the holy waiting of the Advent season. Mary in holy waiting waits upon the fullness of time in which she brings forth the child Christ. Her waiting is the waiting of the Church in Advent,

We wait upon the motions of God's Word coming to us, pondering these things in our hearts, just like Mary.

"Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart"

Fr. David Curry
Homily, Advent Quiet Day, 9 Dec 2023