

Listening to tributes about the footballer Diego Maradona, one friend of his said when Maradona played for Napoli, they would drive around the streets of Naples and notice large posters of Maradona next to equally large posters of Jesus. It made me think that we wouldn't see that here in England; I mean not only would we not see large posters of any single sports person publicly displayed in the streets, but we also wouldn't see large posters of Jesus either. Although we like to have heroes we are shy about public demonstration, and although we may have a long Christian heritage, Jesus is not the public saviour that he is in many other countries where he is often displayed in murals, statues and posters in public spaces. I'm not saying we should do that but I'm noticing how the English way of keeping the faith is a more private concern. Which makes Christmas a tricky time for Christians because it's the time of year when our faith goes public; everyone else wants a bit of Jesus too. Maybe we feel a bit protective about our religion and resent it when others make claims about the 'true meaning of Christmas.' Which makes the opening words from the passage from Isaiah all the more striking:

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

Imagine praying that in church! Imagine someone crying out for the Lord to *come*—like the sky might open up and God would send Christ once again. I'd imagine that such a public demonstration would seem distasteful to us, in the same way that all the glitter and sparkle of a secularised Christmas seems to be distasteful.

But is it? Isn't Christmas a great outpouring of distastefulness and extraordinary occurrences? Jesus is born in a stinking stable after all, which isn't the most tasteful of locations.

I think we can cope with the gaudy sparkle of an over the top Christmas if we allow ourselves a proper Advent, an Advent where we take the time to watch, wait and prepare. That means we probably need to pay attention to time. Advent is all about taking time; taking time out, spending time intentionally, allowing time to move a little slower.

Time is strange. It goes by extraordinarily fast when you want it to go slow or it moves painfully slow when you need it to move fast. We quote time a lot: “time heals all wounds;” “all in good time;” “time will tell;” “stand the test of time;” “time is of the essence.” All of which appear to be attempts to make our mark on time or to regulate time to our benefit.

I think this first Sunday of Advent is a reminder that our time is not really our own. We like to pretend that it is; that we can manage it efficiently, plan accordingly. That by our sheer determination we can will it to bend to our needs and desires. Liturgical seasons can shape how we make sense of time. After all, the Gospel texts designated for this Sunday most certainly signal a change in time. When apocalyptic writings show up in the Bible, you know time is changing, and it's time to pay attention -- not necessarily to prepare for the end of time, but to expect the revelation of God in our time. And not just God's arrival, but God's ongoing presence. Advent is not just the time before Christmas – it's also the beginning of the church year; the beginning of a circular walk we make towards Easter, as this poem by RS Thomas reminds us:

The Coming by RS Thomas

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, A river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. many People
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

Advent asks us not to treat *this time* differently but to *live in time* differently altogether. The charge to keep awake during this Advent season is not just about waiting with anticipation. It is not just about getting ready or being ready. Can we ever be ready for God entering into humanity, into our sinfulness and brokenness, into our pain and loss, into our joy, into our love, into our longing?

Probably not, and Advent will never be long enough. That's the point. God arrives, regardless of our readiness. God shows up, despite our determination toward manifesting our own destiny.

Ultimately, God's entering into time disrupts time, displaces time, disorients time. Not always comfortably. Not always helpfully. Not always desirably. And never in ways that we can anticipate. Something divine took on mortality, something eternal entered our temporal existence. Somewhere in all of that is the meaning of Advent time.