

Advent reflection
by Fr Augusto Zampini Davies

Introduction

Each year we prepare a month in advance, for our Christmas celebration. This time is called “Advent”, in latin “ad-venire”, in Spanish “lo/el que viene”, in English “the coming of someone or something”. But there are two ways in which we can prepare and celebrate Christmas. One way is to live it as a *circular time*, meaning something that is repeated and commemorated (ok, Christmas again... cool). The other way is to live it as a *horizontal or linear time* meaning, a time in which every year something absolutely new is happening (Christ is coming to us, to me, to the world... wow!). In other words, we can merely believe that Jesus “was” born and thus celebrate his birthday, or instead we can believe that Christ the Saviour “is” born and therefore celebrate the Incarnation of God himself, something that transforms our history and our lives. Indeed, with the incarnation of Christ, everything that is human becomes inextricably related with God, and everything that is divine can no longer be separated from humanity. This intimate connection opens a whole new spectrum of *hope*. The ancient Greek and Roman notion of hope, ἐλπίς, often limited to expectations of the future, either happy or sad ones (Plato)¹, is now widened to the present. The popular Hellenic ἐλπίς, normally restricted to the familiar, meaning a hope based only on that dimension of nature that can be investigated scientifically (Democritus)², is opened to the unknown, to the transcendent aspirations of human beings.

¹ See Bultmann and Rengstorf (1963), p.1.

² Ibid., p.4.

But do not panic, I won't give you a philosophical or theological lecture on "hope". Instead, in order to help our preparation for Christmas, I'll propose a short journey based on the Gospel of Luke and on some of the Advent readings. We'll start with the Annunciation, and after passing through the Visitation and the Acclamation (Magnificat), we will end up with Christ's birth. Along the journey we will see a "progression" of God's presence and his favour: firstly on a woman, then on a family, afterwards on a people, and finally on the whole planet and cosmos. By meditating on this salvific presence we can allow God to renew or increase our "hope", hope in our personal vocation, in our religious community and the Church, hope in a new world³.

Departure: Annunciation. A favoured woman, a dreamer man (Lk 1:28; Mt 1:18-25)

It comes as no surprise that the Incarnation of Christ was announced to a "simple" woman who, due to her simplicity, was open to God's ever new messages. Nor is it surprising that this announcement was made, while the young woman was alone and in contemplation. Still, she receives those words and enters into a dialogue. Receptiveness, therefore, is an accurate word to describe Mary's attitude: receptive to simplicity, receptive to silence, receptive to a surprising messenger and to an unexpected dialogue; receptive in the end to receive and to give life, but not any life, the source of life itself.

In the second Sunday of Advent we'll hear the prophet Isaiah asking his people to prepare the way of the Lord in the *desert* (Is 40:3), in that wide wilderness where one can die due to the tough conditions, but also where one can find a new meaning to life. The desert has been for centuries and for different cultures and religions a mystic

³ See Pope Benedict XVI (2004), n.10.

place, a place of retirement from hectic activities and feverish commitments; a place where one can listen to usually unheard inner voices, both troubling and peaceful ones, or better, to the voice of God himself. Given that the desert is also a place lacking in *everything*, its inhabitants tend to be highly receptive to *anything*. As there is practically no life in the desert, those there value every single manifestation of life and every dimension of their own beings. Moreover, people in the desert often blend into its landscape, i.e. they gradually become as open as their environment. The wild openness generates an all-receptive soul; the over-thirsty land provokes an intensely yielding person, ardent for the basic elements of life: not only food and water, but also companionship, socialisation and a home. The extreme hard conditions of the desert permit one to meditate on the actual things we need to live, and also to make clear those things we need to live well. But to live well does not necessarily mean a life of comfort, but more importantly, as the people of Israel discovered while they were in the desert away from Egypt, to be comforted by God. For the Israelites in the desert, therefore, to have hope in God's comfort (Is 40:1) was to have a future, and this kind of hope "is an indication that a man is in a state of well-being"⁴. This is a hope "fixed" in God, augmented when living in the quietness and openness of the desert, where words can be clearly heard and well received, where the whole person, body and soul alike, are in a unique state of receptiveness.

For more than twenty eight centuries, Israelites and Christians have aimed at having a time or even a life in the desert with the purpose of reaching a receptive stage where they can give space to God and welcome Him, thus finding this special well-being. We, probably have neither the opportunity nor the strength to go to an actual desert, not

⁴ Bultman and Rengstorf (1963), p.10.

even to the analogous desert of a long retreat. However, the good news is that we do not necessarily have to. Mary was in a “desert” state when she received the announcement of the Incarnation, yet she was not physically in the wilderness. Today, and during this month, we can ask for this grace, trying to find some moments and places where this special encounter can happen. As with Mary, through our openness, there is a hope that we can receive God’s always new and renewing message, a hope that our existence and well-being can be fixed in God. The way we receive and give life is what is at stake. As religious persons, we can renew the Spirit that once totally embraced us, inhabited us, and engendered new life.

What if I have become somewhat world-weary about this? Some attitudes may prevent this happening. Apart from finding the “desert” of time and space in prayer and contemplation, the attitudes of Jesus’ parents toward the message of the Incarnation are worth considering. In the case of the Virgin Mary, she asked the messenger how that could happen. She initiated a process of discernment, a discernment that perhaps most of us have been through at early stages in our vocation. How can this be possible, Lord? ... Advent is a time to ask that question again, not necessarily to go back to our first call (a circular approach to Advent), but most crucially to put the question in the present tense and be open to a new answer. (a linear and historical approach to Advent). We already know part of the answer. As with Mary, God has favoured us with a special mission for which He has given us a particular gift. Can we receive that source of life today, and engendered new life? We also know that almighty God has looked with compassion on our lowliness, and through experience we know deeply that our call was not due to our perfection or promising future, but rather to God’s genuine and gratuitous way of loving us.

On the other hand, Joseph has showed us that our dreams are worth listening to and interpreting with intelligence and passion. Advent, indeed, is a season for dreaming, a time to dream about the renewal of our vocation, about more justice in this unfair world, about peace in these trouble days, about reconciliation when hate and revenge abound everywhere. One marvellous consequence of Christ's Incarnation is that our dreams are intimately linked with God's dreams, as the story of Joseph shows. As our dreams to renew our religious vocation -or to bring justice and reconciliation on earth- may be just utopia without God's assistance, so God's dreams remain trapped in heaven without the intervention of human beings, of concrete dreamers who can freely decide to bring them to birth, as Joseph did. His dreams went beyond any human expectation, any religious practice or even any dream (e.g. a pregnant virgin who will give life to the Saviour of life). They were God's dreams incarnate in this man, as perhaps our religious vocation is. Recognising, discerning and performing these dreams seem to be "the" task for Advent.

There is, however, one single -though serious- problem in this regard, which happens to be the difference between our dreams assumed by God and His dreams carried out by us. When we dream about anticipating heaven, we cannot but imagine a better life: more justice and peace, more integration and dialogue, more respect for nature, etc. And this is perfectly normal, since in heaven justice and peace will embrace each other and communion will be eternally perfect. But when God dreams of human salvation, is just the other way round. When He dreams of saving people, he needs to assume humanity in depth, i.e. imperfection, suffering, etc. Consequently, those people God dreams of, probably don't have a "dream" life. Indeed, Joseph's problems didn't end when he received Mary and her son in his house. On the contrary, his home became

nowhere: a pilgrimage towards Bethlehem with no place to stay, and the baby to be born in a manger; a migration to Egypt so as to protect the baby, but knowing that other innocent babies were being cruelly murdered instead; even when they were able to settle down, Jesus would be lost in Jerusalem and, after a three-day search, he would reappear reminding his step-father that he had another “Father” who made a greater claim on him. Well, this is not precisely a “dream” life, at least not a dream that most of us, modern people, would like to have.

Which kind of dreams and hopes do we have for this Christmas? According to what we said about Joseph, if we are dreaming of a Christmas without human suffering, which ignores our limitations or problems and sidelines human struggles and exclusions, then we can probably have a good party, but this is certainly not Christmas. The absence of human problems in religious vocations or on the pilgrimage to justice and peace is a utopia, an empty dream which can only bring frustration. Conversely, true Christmas is about God’s dreams, which are related to human salvation, which assumes human limitations, our limitations. It is precisely for this reason that God’s dreams can bring actual liberation and hope; it is precisely God being born into our problems that can create a merry Christmas. For that to happen, new Josephs or dreamers are needed: new Josephs who can receive the Child and his mother in their limited and troubled homes, who are not ashamed of putting the Child in their mangers and who are willing to travel with him despite the danger. Are we willing to be this kind of dreamer?

Let me finish this section of the Annunciation with a brief story connected with Mary’s question: “how can this be possible?” and with Joseph’s dream. It is also a story that I consider fundamental to my own vocation, a story about a “favoured” woman, Isabel.

Isabel was a disabled lady from a poor region of my Diocese, Villa La Niata. Living in poverty-stricken circumstances, she lay in her bed all day, alone. Her husband used to give her food in the morning and in the evening, when he got back from work. She could hardly speak Spanish or communicate in any language properly. Her way of speaking was by swearing every other word, even without realising how inappropriate this was. I had been sent to her by the Parish priest. My mission was to prepare her to receive her First Holy Communion, something that my three predecessors and five lay catechists had tried without success to do. When I got there for the first time, full of enthusiasm -as young priests tend to be-, her husband told me, in front of her, that I was wasting my time. What could I, a Holy Priest, say to this “stupid old woman” –sic-? This rudeness increased my zeal, and in the most polite way possible, I told the guy that he didn’t need to worry, that old women are not stupid in the sight of God. After he went off, I approached the woman sympathetically. An hour later, I realised that it was almost impossible to have a conversation with her; she couldn’t understand a word I was saying; nor could I understand her. Was her husband right?

After that I started to visit her once a week, and each week we had a similar dialogue with her husband and a similarly frustrating experience with her. After three months, I noticed that she kept a notebook under her bed, which apparently was precious to her because it was wrapped in a plastic bag for protection, and neither her husband nor her grown up children had access to it. Once I asked her if she would show it to me. There were some drawings that I was not able to decipher. Advent was getting closer, and the phrase “favoured woman” was in the back of my mind. So I asked her about her life, but she couldn’t string a sentence in reply. So I kept on reading the Gospel... pointless, as always. Suddenly, I said to her that I was going to tell her a story. In my

words, with signs, and with some drawings I made in her notebook (note that I am a hopeless artist), I started to tell her the parables of the kingdom. This was the key to open her soul.

It turned out that she had been a fisher-woman, and after several weeks she understood the parable of the miraculous catch, where good and bad fish were afterwards separated. She was also the last of fifteen children! As a child, she used to take care of the sheep in the islands of the Delta of Buenos Aires, where they lived. I cannot describe her face when she realized that the good shepherd looking after us is Jesus, and that she was one of the sheep of his flock. Similar things happened with the rest of the parables. In the meantime, and given that she had a bad memory, she “studied” her drawings thoroughly each day. To her family –all illiterate persons without any formal education-, she became the “pupil of the Priest”. Suddenly she gained inner social status, and became the only “scholar” of the family, to the amazement of his husband. Finally, her dreams of receiving communion came true. Lots of members of the community went to her humble house for a special mass, presided over by the Parish Priest, who asked me just before the mass: “how can this be possible?” I preferred to ask Isabel out loud what she was feeling at that moment; her own words were: “I am a favoured *damned* woman”. Then I thought to myself: “nothing is impossible to God”. A couple of months later she passed away.

First stop: Visitation. A favoured family (Lk 1:43)

Being favoured by God, or having divine dreams is not something to be kept to oneself. After the Annunciation, Mary went in haste into the hill country to visit her cousins Zechariah and Elizabeth. There Mary and Elizabeth shared God’s blessings of the new

lives they were both carrying in their wombs; through a visit, they shared their hopes in life⁵. Hope, in fact, in rabbinic Judaism, is centred in the messianic expectation, which is not a matter for the individual, but for the whole Jewish people and religious community⁶. Thus, hopes are to be shared in community. Likewise in Hellenic Judaism, hope belongs to life (Ecclus 14:2), and one person can inspire hope in another (Ecclus 13:6), which is transmitted from one generation to another; hope is often of salvation from God (2Mac 11:7), where one is filled with expectations of immortality (Wis 3:4)⁷. In short, actual hope fixed in God is something that needs to be shared, expanded, transmitted to communities or families and to new generations. This is what we have in the scene of the Visitation.

But how did this sharing occur, and what was the outcome of it? Luke tells us that it was a “visit” and an “encounter”. Is there anything simpler than a visit? Regardless of its simplicity, a visit can actually change our lives forever, whilst the lack of some visits can hurt us deeply. Encounters, on the other hand, are not as simple as visits; they are actually a development of them, where something of the visitor and the visited is exposed, often with great fear of rejection⁸. When this is well-received, it usually generates relief; and when what is exposed and received is God’s favour on us, the outcome is often an overwhelming joy. The visit and post-encounter, therefore, can transcend the limitations of the individuals and generate something new, not only in the relationship, but also in each person.

⁵ For a further explanation about why Christian hope cannot be individualistic, see Pope Benedict XVI (2004), n.13-15.

⁶ Bultmann and Rengstorf (1963), p.15.

⁷ Ibid., p.29.

⁸ Williams (1994), p.13.

When Elizabeth was filled with the divine Spirit that her cousin and visitor (Mary) had passed on to her, she had the honour, according to Luke, of being the first person to joyfully recognise that Jesus is the Lord. The joy, therefore, was caused not because all the problems in Elizabeth's life had been solved, nor because the struggle of her people had ceased, but rather because she had received something new, from God, through the visit of her cousin. Likewise, Mary was overwhelmed with joy after Elizabeth's blessing, hence was able to sing a new song of hope expanded now to the whole people of Israel. Still, her problems did not end there.

On the third Sunday of Advent we will celebrate *Gaudete Sunday* (a day of joy). However, Our Christmas joy, will not be because all the problems of our families or communities have been resolved, nor because poverty has been eliminated from the earth, nor because wars such as the one in Afghanistan have come to an end – although we hope it will happen soon. On the contrary, we will certainly rejoice by perceiving God's visit and presence among us, including His visit to and His presence *in* our problems, anxieties, miseries and conflicts. Moreover, we must not confuse Advent-Christmas joy with selfish consumerism or solitary amusement; the hope for actual joy will come from simple visits and deep encounters, from sharing God's favours so as to expand our human limitations, as happened with Elizabeth and Mary. If we are aiming at having joyful Christmas parties, we need to prepare them thoroughly so as to foster these encounters to prevent futile celebrations or exchanging empty salutations.

When the prophet Isaiah announces that the coming of the Christ will fill our empty valleys (Is 40:4), we can think about our loneliness or individualism, feelings that often

favour consumerism and shallow encounters. As psychologists tell us, consumerism, is an activity in which we buy unnecessary things because we want to fill something that is empty in our lives. However, by consuming without need, we normally end up emptier than we were before, so we consume even more so as to try to “fill in” that empty valley, entering a vicious circle that hollows out our souls. Unlike consumerism or alcoholism or any other “isms” which cannot give us what they promise to, the coming of our God can. Advent, therefore, is a time in which we can hope that “every valley will be filled in”, valleys inhabited by individuals-in-community, by sharing valuable gifts that inspire us to further this sharing and prevent us from having false hopes (Ecclus 34,1). New generations are thirsty for this hope; religious persons fixed on God can transmit it.

My story to illustrate and finish this section of the Visitation is about Rafaela, a woman from my former parish in a shanty town in Greater Buenos Aires, who was terribly abused by her husband. It was not until she started to share the gift of being alive in the parish, and the gift of her children with her mother and one of her neighbours, that she started to discover her own dignity and rediscover some self-esteem, with which she was able to begin a new life. Her family as a sharing-community gave her the confidence to stop this abuse from happening. Simple visits and deep encounters bring hope for a new way of living.

Second stop: Acclamation. A favoured people (Lk1:54)

But salvation is not restricted to a favoured woman and a favoured family. After the encounter between the two mothers, both filled by the Holy Spirit, Mary acclaimed the Lord with the *Magnificat*. The “great things” that God is praised for are related to

exalting those at the bottom of society's priorities: Mary as a slave and humble girl; the hungry filled with good things; Israel as servant of God and enslaved by other people, now helped with God's merciful presence⁹. The chronological way of introducing God's Incarnation by Luke permits us to see a progress in the way salvation operates: from one person, to a family, to the whole of Israel, particularly to those in need.

Connecting this introduction of actual salvation with Isaiah's prophecy (40:3), the way of the Lord is being prepared not only by filling empty valleys, but also by levelling mountains and hills. The hills may represent difficulties (climbing and descending, often in tough weather), and inequality (extreme contrasts within the land's surface). The Saviour, through his favoured persons and peoples, is coming to lay low those difficulties and inequalities that prevent the people from developing as humans (difficult and steep mountains) or from forging actual communion (the difference in height, the gap between the inhabitants). When the Saviour was born, he was wrapped in swaddling bands and laid in a manger. Can this be connected with Isaiah's prophecy about the Servant being wrapped in a mantle of justice (61:10)? It doesn't seem to be the fulfilment of the prophecy altogether, but it may be the beginning of a process promoting a different type of justice that can liberate human beings from these alienating gaps. The Christ, by being wrapped around with bands of rejection (there was no place for them in the inn), and being laid in a poor manger, was placing himself on one side of the social spectrum, a position clearly depicted in Luke's Gospel¹⁰. Moreover, the acclamation following Jesus' birth was firstly performed by poor, homeless and fearful shepherds. Therefore, now the poor can have hope

⁹ King. (2004), p. 128.

¹⁰ Ibid.

because God is on their side and is really coming to rescue them. The power of Christmas is about conveying this hope to millions of people, who unfortunately are the majority of the world's population.

Are we poor enough to have this hope in Christmas? Are our celebrations reflecting this favour of God to his people, not merely Israelites (or Christians), but also to all those "poor" people willing and needing to receive God's favour, the favour of his familiar presence?

Despite the "consumerist negative side", Christmas has many positives. One is that people are thirsty for something special that goes beyond the material gift or special meal. It is about inclusiveness, about being part of something. Participating in God's birth *in* our poverties and miseries can actually transform our lives, as occurred with Mary and with the shepherds. This can set our hope on fire. When something good happens in our communities, nobody likes to be set apart from it. For example, in one of the centres for youth in the same shanty town I mentioned before, there was a little boy called El Manco. He loved being there on Wednesday evenings, because we used to play games without cheating, we shared a proper although simple tea without fighting, and we had a normal time without bullying anyone. But one day he came with a gun, and three seven year old girls came to tell me that. When I called El Manco and asked him what he was carrying under his shirt, he wouldn't answer. As a result, El Manco was politely -but immediately- expelled from the centre, because there were three sacrosanct conditions for being there: "no drugs, no alcohol, no guns". Off he went then. Half an hour later he came back, with nothing under his shirt; and he

continued playing. He didn't want to miss the event or to be excluded from it, nor was he rejected by the others. When Christ is around, there is hope for inclusion.

There are lots of Christmas celebrations proclaiming and announcing God's presence among the poor. In London, I know that at St Martin in the Fields there is a great celebration with the lonely and abandoned by society. Near my house too (e.g. Kairos centre). Can the lonely in our communities have this hope for Christmas? Can we?

Arriving: Birth of the Messiah. A favoured planet (Lk 2:11; Jn 1:14)

If there is any doubt as to whether to consider Christ as the universal Saviour, we just need to read thoroughly the story of His birth. Christ's universality is not restricted to human beings, but also to the whole universe, our planet included. The prophet Micah announces that Salvation is to happen in "our land" (...), or better, as St Peter puts it, we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness will dwell (2Pe 3:13). Similarly, during the Vigil mass we hear how the prophet Isaiah reveals that our "land" is no more to be called "Desolate", but "Espoused". Moreover, the angel of the Lord asserts to Joseph that there is no need to fear taking Mary his wife and the child into his "house", his land, his place. Furthermore, during Christmas Day mass we will hear how the "Word made his dwelling among us", put his camp on our land. Our land, which is ours and God's environment, is expecting justice and salvation too¹¹. Although we know that total justice will only come at the end of time, God's salvation is already present. The Christians' mission is to expand it to all individuals and peoples, and to the earth as well.

¹¹ For a succinct and compelling theological explanation of the cosmic significance of Christ's coming to earth, see Deane-Drummond (2009), pp. 95-103.

It is not a coincidence that CAFOD has proposed the “Live Simply Day” for the last Sunday of Advent, as a way of increasing our hope in this new earth that the coming of Christ will bring. Advent is indeed a time to discern the way we consume and understand our wellbeing, and also the way we produce things and understand progress. It is a time to hope that the Church will be more involved in environmental issues, as Pope Benedict argued in his latest *Encyclical Caritas in Veritate*: “The way humanity treats the environment” –the Pope affirms- “influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa”, which “invites contemporary society to a serious review of its life-style”¹².

The Live Simply Day might not change the dramatic environmental situation, also linked with serious social and economic problems, but it will certainly promote an awareness about consumer choices, contributing to a new culture that can generate energy and production in a more friendly manner, a global culture that does not foment the “desertification” of our land, but rather fulfils the “spouse-productive-for all” prophecy of the coming of the Messiah.

God will come to fill the empty valleys, to level the steep hills, and also to straighten winding ways (Is 40:4), e.g. our confusions and complexities. Our present paramount complexity is the environmental problem. This is something that concerns us all, and is inextricably related to economic, juridical, political, cultural and inter-generational issues. Excluding “our land” for Advent-Christmas is to cut future generations off from Christian hope. Conversely, the hope of people living simply and celebrating this in Advent gives us a new sense of “expectation”, widening salvation to our nature too. In

¹² Pope Benedict XVI (2009), n.51.

addition, it is a hope that gives us “confidence” in Messianic changes, a confidence that allow us to be patient while working for a complete new heavens and earth at the end of time(1Co 15:19; 2Co 1:10; 3:12; Phil 1:20; Heb 3:6; 1Pe 1:21). It is a hope that winding paths can be made straight, although we would need to walk a long way through their diversions, through our confused perception of nature, economic development, and human wellbeing.

Christ’s birth, our final point of this reflection, is actually the starting point for a new planet, where individuals, families and communities, peoples and nations and God himself live together. This starting point is about our awareness of God among us, his camp on our land, which should open a new reflection on our relationship with nature, our duties towards it, and our responsibility of transmitting hope to future generations.

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