

Advent II

What do you think, I wonder, as you look out upon the onset of another English Christmas?

There's an almost offensive tide of commercialism, of course, and it would be wrong for me to ignore that element. But perhaps it would be unnecessary for me to dwell on it for any length of time, beyond taking note of its power to fill almost any space that's allotted to it. And if that's all you've got, it will take up your whole self with little difficulty, leaving you very empty when it's gone.

There's also another note which we should be unhappy about: the evacuation of the Christian meaning of Christmas. I'd be happy to celebrate Diwali with my Hindu friends, knowing it isn't my faith, but joining in their celebration of good overcoming evil. I wouldn't want to take from that feast its stories and themes, rubbishing them and tipping them away. I think people who aren't Christians should be the same about Christmas, entering with respect and interest into the mystery which gives us this deep cause for joy.

This leads on to my own feeling about Advent. We have this season of fabulous imagery, sharp, powerful poetry - a season which speaks volumes to the human heart. It is a season of winter quiet, and remembrance of times past, a time for valuing and revaluing memory itself, a humble time of honesty and truthfulness, qualities which can draw us back together for warmth, simplicity of heart, and restful contemplation of the condition of our life. I like to think of our farming ancestors, who knew they had little to do in these short days, and who found themselves in meditative lamplight as they awaited the turning of the year.

And then: to find this gigantic gift, that comes to us all indiscriminately, but with greatest force to the poorest of us: the coming to our side of the Son of God, a man, like us in everything but sin; his coming as a baby, to be cradled in the two human hands of a carpenter; born in darkness, turning it to angelic festival; gathering pilgrims - shepherds from the fields, wise men from the east - not to some esoteric plunge into drunken dementia or ecstatic exaltation, but to the vision of what God had promised and revealed: the seeing of the human mystery itself, made radiant by the eternal light from which it was born. That mystery cost us nothing, came as pure gift; it is towering divine grandeur, enclosed in human scale, and to see it, we must all bend our backs, and enter through the narrow door.

The garish light of the shops and the city yield easily to the quiet light of the Messiah's birth. We know this so clearly, and it will take us little effort to choose the calm and quiet, if we *give* ourselves the choice. I think that if just a few of us did that, if we simply insisted on praying a little each day, if we turned down the anxiety and the noise, and kept our hearts full of the lovely mystery of the time, without making ourselves a nuisance, or preaching petulantly, we would feed the real festival of Christmas for others, we would light a lamp for them to find their way. The real note we should hear in all this noise, is the deep longing of *everyone* for something to make us rejoice, something to bring us together, something to brighten our hope.

We have this gift to offer. Don't let ignorance and shallowness obliterate it. It is very much needed in these next few days.