**Advent** is a word that suggests a journey and indeed an adventure. If life isn't an adventure we would die of boredom or sadness.

As in the great quests in myths across all cultures, the hero in Advent is looking for something – often their true home or ‘father’. There are trials to be endured and knowledge to be won by testing ourselves at the extreme limits of the known. Failures are part of the process and important teachers, which train us to think of success in less egocentric, cosmic ways.

The strange thing about the Christian adventure quest is the non-duality of the story. Is it us seeking God or God seeking us? Is it the Son ‘coming to his own’ and not being made welcome or us setting out across the interstellar spaces towards the primordial moment of creation? The answer to this paradox – although paradoxes don’t have answers – is spoken when God pours infinite fullness into the limited receptacle of a human container. This is the Incarnation, Jesus.

As a Christian adventure, the season of Christmas opens the annual cycle of the spiritual New Year. It squares the circle of cyclical and linear time – what goes round and what passes through the mortality of the human dimension is like an arrow shooting into death. Daily meditation does the same, allowing us to both live in spiritual time and do the laundry.

Liturgical time contains: Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and the long Ordinary Time and lots of Feasts and the occasional Solemnity. One of the benefits for the meditator of following a liturgical season is that it helps embed and nourish our personal daily practice in the rich soil of a living transmission of wisdom – a tradition.

This year’s Advent reflections will revolve around the Sunday gospel of each week. They may also provide some resources for the adventure of each weekday that connects the following four Sundays.

Using Advent wisely could help us to celebrate - not the fake consumerist festival it has become - but the real Feast of Christmas. This Feast comes around annually but each time it marks a new stage of the arrow’s flight of our lives. I hope our weekly reflections will help you prepare and celebrate for this festival that sheds such light on the love that flows between God and ourselves – the longest love affair in the cosmos.
That day will be sprung on you suddenly, like a trap

Jesus said to his disciples: ‘There will be signs in the sun and moon and stars; on earth nations in agony, bewildered by the clamour of the ocean and its waves; men dying of fear as they await what menaces the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand erect, hold your heads high, because your liberation is near at hand.

‘Watch yourselves, or your hearts will be coarsened with debauchery and drunkenness and the cares of life, and that day will be sprung on you suddenly, like a trap. For it will come down on every living person on the face of the earth. Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen, and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.’

For those for who are, not just admirers, but disciples Jesus is the sadguru, the root teacher of the human quest. Faith is relationship. A unique companionship on life’s journey rescuing us from isolation while freeing us from suffocation by the crowd. Like any faithful relationship, discipleship evolves, taking many forms, becoming a deeper union, taking us through the worst that can befall us.

As our centre of gravity Jesus identifies us - to ourselves - as ‘disciples’. From the Latin discere, to learn. Often we see Jesus speaking directly and intimately to his disciples differently from his public voice. He longs to share with us everything he has learned as a disciple to the Father. His longing for us to understand brings a historic religious revolution to discipleship and our sense of God: ‘I call you servants no longer but friends, because I have shared with you everything I have learned for the Father.’ You cannot fear a friend.

We begin the quest of Advent by listening to what he says about the end of the world, our private world, the planetary world, every kind of world. It is apocalyptic. I have just watched the iconic film about the Vietnam war – Coppola’s Apocalypse Now. Based on Joseph Conrad’s novel Heart of Darkness, the film climaxes with the depiction of the remote upriver settlement in Cambodia where the renegade American Colonel Kurtz presides insanely over a deranged army governed by fear. He is in profound psychic pain, but his mind is frighteningly clear. The horror and atrocities of war pushed him over the edge.

The horror then turned inwards against himself and outwards to the world. Marlon Brando says the famous words ‘the horror, the horror’ with chilling conviction worse than any horror film.

Jesus warns his disciples to be prepared for the horror. His language should evoke our fear of an ecological apocalypse, the first signs of which we see in the Californian fires, the floods, the deforestation, the plastic-polluted oceans, the change of seasons and melting ice caps. Denial is the first reaction to the fear of death. But the inescapable fear will build, disrupting all relationships. Behind every manifestation of fear is the horror of loss, the death aroused by every loss we undergo. Men die of fear, Jesus says. Because fear deprives us of the capacity for love.

To his disciples he imparts his liberating command. He doesn’t say you sinners have much to fear. He says ‘do not fear’. Be upright, dignified in your divine humanity. And ‘wait’. This is a core teaching of Advent: to learn to wait. Waiting is a learned practice, like meditation.

The best response to the ‘horror’ of fear is to wait as this releases the hidden resource of hope. Waiting is self-control, care for our mental health and equanimity, avoiding excess, addiction and anxiety: the conscious and hopeful waiting of the disciple not the frenetic impatience of the consumer. Stay conscious, he tells us, and pray at all times. This is the other core theme of Advent: to be in the state of continuous prayer. The daily times of meditation develop this state.

At the beginning of our preparation for Christmas, we have at least learned we are not waiting for Santa Claus.
In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar’s reign, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of the lands of Ituraea and Trachonitis, Lysanias tetrach of Abilene, during the pontificate of Annas and Calaphas the word of God came to John son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. He went through the whole Jordan district proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the sayings of the prophet Isaiah:

A voice cries in the wilderness:
Prepare a way for the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley will be filled in,
every mountain and hill be laid low,
winding ways will be straightened
and rough roads made smooth.
And all mankind shall see the salvation of God.

It might not seem very important to know that Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene when John the Baptist began to preach repentance. But maybe it does help us remember the historicity of our tradition and the universal need for prophets. The wild prophet of the Jordanian desert is an archetype of all those who call us to our senses, defying the social Establishment, exposing the official denials and evasions, simply saying it as it is even when they are condemned by the authorities as enemies of the people and scapegoated or assassinated.

John is an Advent figure, preparing the way for the appearance of Jesus on the public stage. Advent means literally a ‘coming towards’. He is coming towards us and, as we sense that approach, perhaps we start going out to meet him. This is spatial imagery used to describe a spiritual event unlimited by space or time but still happening in human geography and real time.

What is at the heart of the prophet’s message? A ‘baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’. For many today, these terms have as much meaning as the language of computer programming. But they evoke important and timeless human needs for meaning, ritual and transformation. Sin is endemic. The world is ravaged by sin, personal and collective, in families, in corporate boardrooms, in pollution of the planet or against the minds of the young.

We might give guilt, shame, sorrow or regret as synonyms for ‘repentance’. Not bad reactions, at least for a while, when we acknowledge our sins and the harm we have done to others. We should do more, however, than just shrug our shoulders and say ‘let’s move on’. The essential meaning of repentance (metanoia) is not just what we do but a change of mind, literally ‘beyond mind’. Against the horror of fear and being trapped in destructive patterns of behaviour, nothing less will do than a shift in the very operating system of our attention. It is not a change of belief that we need but a change of perception, not ideology but how and what we see.

This initiates the process of forgiveness within and towards ourselves. It is never easy to see how lost, deceived or self-centred we once were. Recognition of this demands reconciliation with the true self we had rejected. We cannot forgive others the harm they inflicted until we have understood what forgiving ourselves means. ‘Why should I forgive myself? He’s the one who hurt me!’ Maybe - and justice must certainly be seen to be done. But if we are to become whole, it is not enough to be a victim. We need to be healed by a change of perspective, by a new way of seeing the whole situation.

Repentance goes with ‘baptism’, a visible sign of what is happening within consciousness. This may have explicit religious meaning as in initiation into a new community, which helps keep the change of mind going. But meditation too is a baptism, an immersion in the stream of consciousness. And it has an outward form, visible signs. How we sit, manifest stillness and outer silence, our daily rhythm of morning and evening, are rituals that express and fortify the process of changing our mind, expanding our consciousness. Meditation also expresses the smoothing out and filling in that Isaiah describes, showing us that we are delivered from horror to a new state of health and flourishing.
THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT - LAURENCE FREEMAN OSB  
LUKE 3:10-18

'Someone is coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire'

When all the people asked John, 'What must we do?' he answered, 'If anyone has two tunics he must share with the man who has none, and the one with something to eat must do the same.' There were tax collectors too who came for baptism, and these said to him, 'Master, what must we do?' He said to them, 'Exact no more than your rate.' Some soldiers asked him in their turn, 'What about us? What must we do?' He said to them, 'No intimidation! No extortion! Be content with your pay!' A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people, who were beginning to think that John might be the Christ, so John declared before them all, 'I baptise you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fan is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out.' As well as this, there were many other things he said to exhort the people and to announce the Good News to them.

The world that Jesus was born into was as discontented and made dysfunctional by institutional injustice as any. The times of optimism and boundless hope are few and short-lived. The election of a Kennedy or an Obama, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the heady days of a political revolution inspired by ideals or the immediate aftermath of a war, wedding days, all new beginnings are occasions to believe the impossible and forget how all previous such hopes were disappointed. It is the poor who buy lottery tickets.

Social sins - such as we have embedded in our financial systems that send luxury house prices rocketing while increasing numbers, even in affluent societies, can barely house and feed their families - drain the spirit and disempower the will. In such despair, the people came out to John asking simply 'what shall we do?'

John the Baptist is Advent, actively waiting for the Messiah. In response to the people's question, he confronts the injustices and social sins of his time that oppressed the lives but also the souls of those who came to the desert to hear him. They wondered about him, hoping that he may be the saviour who will right all wrongs and re-establish the order of justice. The unhappy are always looking for a messiah.

He is not, nor even a social revolutionary. He tells the tax collectors not to extract more than their due and soldiers not to use their power to exploit and intimidate. How many societies today, rife with corruption in politics, judiciary and police, could he not have said this to? It is the bare minimum for justice. And it cannot be separated from the spiritual dimension – as St Oscar Romero came to understand. Nor can we draw a red line between our meditation and the way we live, vote, spend our disposable income and relate to the problems of the day.

I once gave a retreat to priests in the Philippines from a very poor and remote part of the country. The seminary where we gathered was as minimal as many of the homes of the people and the priests who served them. I remember the sink in my room fell off the wall when I touched it and I felt bad about causing them more expense. As I spoke individually with the priests, I realised what true servants of the people they were, caring for their material rights and needs, defending their dignity, as well as nourishing their religious and spiritual lives.

On a visit to Venezuela I met a smart young businessman. He travelled frequently to the US to arrange the flow of luxury items back to customers at home who had the money to pay. Most people even then scraped and struggled humiliatingly for bare necessities. What disturbed me more, though, was his blank refusal to discuss the social situation or politics at all. It was the ‘public’ sphere and he had enough to do in his own ‘private’ world. When I pushed him, he justified his attitude by saying of the politicians ‘they’re all the same.’ It was the logic of the jungle badly wrapped.

When Jesus finally appears on the scene he will be, like John, a prophet excoriating injustice, defending the defenceless passionately for justice. This may have been the actual cause of his downfall more than his truly revolutionary spiritual revelation. But he will be more than a prophet. His word will show humanity a radical new social system attuned to the presence of God in all things. This alignment of the inner and outer worlds, harmonising the political and the mystical, he calls the Kingdom. To hear this, to listen, to wait and to pray and to stay awake is to be ‘baptised with the Spirit and fire’. The proof is that it will burn us.
Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?

Mary set out and went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. Now as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She gave a loud cry and said, 'Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord? For the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy. Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.'

The gospels of the past three weeks have had a male cast, reflecting the male-dominated world of the middle-eastern culture into which the long-awaited Jesus would be born. This gospel shifts completely to the world of women and two expectant women who have learned Advent – to wait, to pray and to have their minds changed.

St Luke is, for his time, unusually, maybe uniquely attuned to women, the poor and marginal and children – all those in the world of their time who were habitually overlooked or devalued. His attention to them reflects the good news of Jesus that seen in the light of God there simply are no marginal, no second-class, no disposable groups. Our contemporary concern - in what is left of liberal democracy – for minorities, equal rights for women and economic justice can also, even if at less depth of understanding, reflect this wisdom of universal equality. So, even if nature is not fair in the way it hands out its gifts, humans can be just in the way they protect and respect the least fortunate.

Despite cultural differences, justice is an inborn instinct arising from the essential goodness of human nature. This goodness is God. It reveals the capacity of the human to be divinised just as the child that leapt in Elizabeth's womb in the presence of the embryo in Mary's testifies to the divine capacity to become flesh. In Advent, we may not be sure whether we are coming to God or God is coming to us and the conclusion must be both movements are inseparable.

Centuries of paintings of the Visitation show the girl Mary and the older woman Elizabeth embracing each other. When John, Elizabeth's child leapt, Mary her kinswoman heard another declaration of the meaning of her own baby. Again she says nothing, barely understanding anything of the mystery she has been engulfed in. At the Annunciation Mary only said yes. In the stories of the birth, the exile and the return to Nazareth, she is silent. She rebukes the boy Jesus for causing her anxiety when he disappears in the Temple and she speaks to him at the wedding feast. Otherwise her luminous presence in the gospels is silent, conscious, concerned, committed even at the foot of the Cross, to the one she and the world had waited for. Her silence in the presence of mystery is the model of contemplation for our own time that often veers between reductionism and superstition.

Of course we know little or nothing of the historic origins of symbolic stories like these and we never will. But we are no less capable of being awakened and moved by the reality they expose. The Advent mind is holistic, open to profound and beautiful, evocative symbols that convey truth intuitively and directly. We feel something leap in us but we can't yet see it fully.

Advent after all is about gestation, the experience of an unseen presence in the womb of our spirit. This is powerful in itself – as is our quiet meditation in which the process of growth is largely known only through its fruits. Birth is another stage of reality's self-revelation proving what we knew without knowing. But even birth doesn't settle the matter because it opens the mystery even wider.
In the beginning was the Word: and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came to be, not one thing had its being but through him. All that came to be had life in him and that life was the light of men, a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower. The Word was the true light that enlightens all men; and he was coming into the world. He was in the world that had its being through him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own domain and his own people did not accept him. But to all who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to all who believe in the name of him who was born not out of human stock or urge of the flesh or will of man but of God himself. The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Christmas is one of those ‘Solemnities’ in the liturgical drama of the year that used to weave in and out of linear, working day time. To us it seems odd to be solemn and joyful at the same time. If something joyful occurs to us at a solemn event where we are meant to look serious, we tend to giggle. But today is a solemn feast and at feasts you are meant to laugh not look pie-faced or hide your joy. One ancient author dared to say ‘no one has the right to be sad today.’

When the punch line of a good joke is delivered well, or a long held secret is disclosed or an obvious solution is finally found to an intractable problem some new joy leaps in us and we laugh. Eureka moments have to be verified and tested and they sometimes open more problems than they solve but they are always to be celebrated. The great solemnities of our lives create a supernova burst of joy that disperses but does not disappear.

Like the Big Bang thirteen billion years ago, the moment in which the infinitely concentrated universe exploded and space and time came into existence. Further back than this we cannot see but the radiation energy of that instant of creation is spread evenly throughout the cosmos from the furthest horizon of the expanding universe to the cellular composition of our bodily organs.

The Prologue to St John’s gospel articulates the wonder of the Incarnation, the self-emptying of God into a human being who would grow to full humanity: ‘The Word was made flesh’. The easiest way mentally to deal with this solemn joy is to explain it by the supernatural. Meditators are inclined, however, to be suspicious of the supernatural. We prefer to look deeper into nature and find new laws and truths that reveal the meaning of mysteries.

St John is thought to have been the ‘beloved disciple’. Whatever this means, it suggests a special level of friendship and understanding. In John we see Jesus weeping for the loss of a friend, tired after a journey, angry with people defiling a sacred space. In John too we see the deepest insight into the nature of Jesus as a complete manifestation of the divine. There are no perfect translations between languages. But Christian faith sees Jesus as the complete translation of God into the human: the most challenging and joyful of religious insights.

A merely intellectual approach to the Incarnation quickly becomes anaemic and incorporeal. St John says, however, ‘we knew him..., spoke with him ate with him, touched him, laughed and cried with him’. Mary was held in such esteem because as a mother she above all knew him in the flesh. If we stop there in the written record we risk becoming stuck at the devotional level, imagining the historical Jesus. This should take us further, beyond imaginative knowledge into contemplative, unitive knowledge where we are one with him. Then it is not only that we imagine him being human because we know him in our own humanity. We know his consciousness dispersed throughout our wholeness. Like the energy of the first moment, creation which happened so that the long Advent of the universe, the long preparation might become Christmas and celebrate the marriage of God and humanity.