

# ADVENT AND TRANSFIGURATION

## God's descent and man's ascent<sup>1</sup>

Advent means arrival or coming. It is a time when we prepare to commemorate God's arrival on earth as man, and also look forward to Christ's Second Coming. Our Gospel reading speaks of "the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory," and the Epistle of us awaiting "the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ". This morning I want to speak about the nature of this meeting of God and man and what it means for us in our daily lives. I will make special reference to the triptych we have before us. It depicts the transfiguration of Christ, flanked by Jacob wrestling with the angel of the Lord on the left, and his dream of the ladder reaching between heaven and earth on the right.



God has come. God will come. God is here.

God has come. Before the birth of Christ, God spoke in diverse and many ways to the prophets. He appeared in

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<sup>1</sup> A talk given by Aidan Hart on 27th November 2011, at All Saints Anglican Church, Baschurch, Shropshire.

visions; He spoke; He worked miracles. But still, He remained something other. He wanted to come closer to us. He wanted to unite Himself to us and us to Him.

And so the Second Person of the Trinity, the pre-eternal God, light of light, true God of true God, became man. He became wholly human while remaining wholly divine. The Word became flesh, yet ceased not to dwell with the Father. This has happened. God has come. A manger has become the throne of the King of Kings.

And yet our Gospel reading reminds us that He is also coming again, with great power and glory. Two thousand years ago the divine-human Christ was planted in history as a seed. And gradually this seed has grown and multiplied into a host of the saints, the children of God. In the Second Coming of Christ the Father will complete His recapitulation of all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

The Scriptures begin with two people in a garden. They end with a multitude in a verdant city. The last two chapters describe "the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2).

God has come. God will come again. But above all, God is here. Christ has not left us alone between His coming in the past and His second coming in the future. Christ was not a human person born of a union of man and woman, upon whom God descended for a while. Nor, as the Son of God, did He become human temporarily, before returning to His Father in heaven just as He was before, somehow leaving His humanity behind on earth.

God forbid. Rather, at His incarnation the Second Person of the Trinity, the pre-eternal God, united His divine nature to our human nature forever. In Christ, God remains forever human. Christ is one divine person in two natures. He is what the Greek Fathers of the Church called *theos-anthropos* - God-human, God-man. Christ suffered as

God-man. Christ died as God-man. Christ was buried as God-man. But death could not have dominion over the King of ages. Christ rose from the dead, and ascended as God-man into heaven. And then He sent the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, into our hearts. God is here, now, with us and in us, closer to us than we are to ourselves.

This is where the Transfiguration of Christ has so much to tell us. This remarkable event draws the three advents together, past, future and present.

The Lord took Peter, James and John with Him to a high place, and He was transfigured before them. "His face shone like the sun," Matthew tells us, "and His clothes became dazzling white." With him there also appeared Moses and Elijah.

Now this event clearly reveals that Christ is God, manifest in the flesh - in the halo of Christ we read the Greek words "O WN", the One Who Is, the Greek translation for Jehovah.

But just as significantly, and perhaps more awesomely, it reveals to us what it is to be truly human. God did not create us to remain merely human: He created us to be humans radiant with His indwelling divinity. As St Athanasius the Great declared in the fourth century: "God became man so that man, by grace, can become god." Or in the words of the Apostle Peter, God "has given us precious and very great promises that by these we may become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). A lamp is not a lamp until it is turned on and radiates light.

One hymn for the Orthodox Feast of Transfiguration declares that "Thou has put Adam on entire, O Christ, and changing the nature grown dark in past times, Thou hast filled it with glory and made it godlike by the alteration of Thy form" (Matins). And another hymn affirms that the Lord "in His own Person showed [the disciples] the

nature of man, arrayed in the original beauty of the Image" (Great Vespers).

We are all called to be transfigured. We are called not merely to follow Christ at a distance, but to be Christ-bearers, to shine with the same glory, the same light of divinity with which He shone. The difference is that Christ is God by nature and human by grace, whereas we are humans by nature but are called to participate in divinity by grace.

But how can this union with God become reality for us? How can you and I begin to experience this light of transfiguration? Like many of you, I am a married man with children, with bills to pay, with dishes to wash, with all the pressures of daily life. In the midst of these pressures, perhaps you and I are meant to settle for shadowy lands rather than transfiguration, for survival rather than a living, daily experienced union with God?

Fortunately, the saints tell us that there are stages in this ascent to the Holy Mountain, three stages. Mountains are climbed a step at a time. I would like to complete my talk by briefly describing these three stages as they are illustrated by our triptych.

First there is purification. This entails our struggle, our effort, our repentance, our turning towards the light. Here on the left in our icon we see Jacob wrestling with the angel of the Lord. The Greek fathers call this effort *ascesis*, asceticism, which means work.

For twelve years I was a novice monk. When I returned to "life in the world" I besought the Lord to give me a rule of life, one that was liveable in my new station, a path that I could follow. He gave me the three verses of 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus." Joy, prayer, thanksgiving.

Paul wrote these words to people like you and me. They were ordinary people living in a city, Thessaloniki. He wasn't addressing a convention of hermits, so he must have believed that the Christians of that city could do what he encouraged them to do. It is possible to rejoice always, to be mindful of God always. As we give thanks in all circumstances it is possible to behold God at work in all things - no matter how at first He seems absent.

Repentance is first and foremost, a change of mind, a change in our way of seeing. The Greek word *metanoia* means literally a change of *nous*, a turning. So these three things: joy, prayer and thanksgiving are fundamental to placing God at the heart of things.

After purification the saints then speak of illumination. What is this? It is the perception of God's hidden word in each thing, from dirt to diamond, from beetle to bird, from sinner to saint. The radiant face of Christ is too bright to behold immediately. We need to ascend toward Him gradually, like the ladder we see on the right in our triptych of Jacob's dream, a ladder ascended by rungs.

Each thing is created by a divine word, a *logos*, and each thing is sustained by this same word spoken by the Word of God. These *logoi* are like footprints within the created world, footprints which will lead us to the Logos Himself. Christians are not pantheists, for God is distinct from creation. But we are pan-entheists, believing that God is in everything. He upholds all things by the word of his power, the scriptures tell us.

We come now to the third stage: union, or mystical theology as it is called in the Orthodox Church. Here, we behold God face to face. We ourselves become all light, all eye, all grace. We behold the Lord as light for we ourselves become light.

Most icons of the Transfiguration show Peter, James and John falling over backwards, unable to bear the sight of the Lord's brilliance. In this icon I have omitted them, for I

wanted us, the viewers, to take their place. We are with the Lord on Mount Tabor, beholding Him transfigured.

We recall our hymn of Transfiguration: "Thou has put Adam on entire, O Christ, and changing the nature grown dark in past times, Thou hast filled it with glory and made it godlike by the alteration of Thy form." Christ appeared with Moses. Moses himself had become light when he was with the Lord on Mount Sinai - he had to cover his face with a veil for he was too radiant for the Israelites to behold. "In thy light shall we see light".

While I lived on Mount Athos I had the blessing to know some living saints. You went away from their presence changed. You did not see light, but you knew you had been in it. These people saw with the eyes of the spirit, and spoke of what they saw. They carried the fragrance of paradise, and in their presence you caught wafts of this sweetness. They had suffered, like Jacob who bore the wounds of his struggle with angel. They considered you better than themselves, for they thirsted to meet God in you. They sought, met, and embraced the Holy Spirit hidden beneath the ego. They addressed not the outer man, but the inner man, that part of us which is made in the divine image, that part which yearns for the Bridegroom.

You went away realizing that Christ was closer than to you than you were to yourself. You realized that, as Jacob said after his dream of the ladder between heaven and earth, "God was in this place and I did not know it."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.