

The Calendar and Benedictus

A homily preached at the High Mass in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, on Sunday, 2015 (The Second Sunday in Advent), by The Reverend Mark Stafford, Chaplain of Pusey House

NO time to pray. That always make me chuckle. It's a bit like saying, "I'm too busy to die". Prayer - like death, it seems to me - may enter time, but it doesn't, properly speaking, exist in time or consist of time. It interrupts it. It absorbs it. It takes it up. Primarily, it transforms time by revealing it to be what it really is: the deliberately broken circle of a screw's thread, designed to draw us into God. Prayer is a kind of chosen miniature death - patient attention to the break in the circle of our ordinary clock time - a gate into the everlasting, which we can either flee, or hold open to let the eternal stream into our temporary world...

"Time flies like an arrow," said Groucho Marx. "Fruit flies like a banana." "Very droll," retorted Albert Einstein. "But, as you are no doubt aware, Groucho, time is an illusion." "Indeed," muttered Douglas Adams, ruefully. "Time is an illusion. And Lunchtime doubly so."

Now as *you* are no doubt aware - although it would have been quite a dinner party, I imagine - such a conversation never actually took place, but a great many relatively similar conversations *do* happen, and with something approaching clockwork regularity. Because, one way or another, we spend an inordinate amount *of* our time, talking and thinking *about* time. Where does the time go? Do you have the time? Doesn't time...fly?...

But for all our preoccupation with it, as Douglas Adams makes clear, you don't have to be Einstein to realise that, when it comes to time, things are not always quite what they seem...

Take, for example, the Church Calendar: as we stand with our backs against yet another year, counting the days to the beginning of the fulfilment of all time (or rather to its anniversary) - it can look and feel like a cycle - with Christmas and Candlemas, and Easter and Pentecost, and Trinity and Remembrance, and Advent and Christmas, all coming round faster and faster with each circuit you make of it, or it makes of you.

And, certainly - based as they are on the turning circles of moon and earth and sun - most calendars across the millennia *have been* cycles of a kind: apparently endless repetitions of patterns that wax and wane...

But things really aren't always what they seem, and the Church Calendar really isn't a cycle - any more than our attempts to conform to the template of heaven, are merely imitating celestial patterns on an earthly plane... It is a line, leading - spiralling - irrevocably towards a singular end; it is a thread drawing heaven and earth together, bringing the temporal, moment by moment, into the eternal.

Our calendar, and our liturgies, appear cyclical because every year in one, and every week in the other, we tell the story we are in, from start to finish; each year - each week - we rehearse this winding line in microcosm, to help us keep the (seemingly) distant points of our origins, and our destiny, together in our minds. And to point us - to draw us - with each turn of the screw - towards the One in whom all things are being reconciled.

In fact, our liturgies and our calendar are intentionally arranged so the beginning and end of the story can be seen at one and the same time, simply because (as Monday's reading from Revelation, that every year officially begins the countdown to Advent, makes clear) they are one and the same *person*: the First and Last, the Alpha and Omega, First Begotten from the Dead...the King that cometh with the clouds.

So, as well in their calendars, churches continually play this fractal game of find and seek with beginnings and endings, in the architecture of the space they define, and the movements they map out within it - in order to convert our chronology to 'kairology'.

Often, you can stand at the West End of a church - Baptismal, Cross and Apse all in your line of sight, and witness the whole of redemptive history represented simultaneously. Here, you can celebrate in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar, the Death, Resurrection and Ascension of the King of Kings, only to find yourself in the final act of that rite, singing at the top of your lungs about His *earliest* entry into His Earthly Realm, and the beginning of that story of humanity's exaltation, in the words of the Annunciation.

Or again, at this point in the Liturgical Year, we can see *this* Sunday's advent of God's Kingdom on earth, set *in just this way* right alongside *last* Sunday's fulfilment in the Ascended Christ crowned Ruler of All.

But although this juxtaposition is purposeful and telling, it is equally instructive that the *order* of these two cosmic events appears back to front in our secular timetables - because all of this is an exercise in deliberate reversal and refraction: this calendar may *look* like the cyclical turn and

return of the planet's orbits, but things here are very *deliberately* not what they seem...

The Church's agenda is nothing less than the rehearsing of its revolutionary new way of conceiving time, the representation of the once for all establishment of the Eternal Kingdom. And the secret of its progress towards its source and consummation.

And so, this week might be the moment when we all start counting down our special calendars to that eagerly anticipated point, when all the windows stand open, and all that was hidden is revealed; but what happens with our Advent Calendars is just a miniature version of what happens in each full Church Year. And both are a call to wake up to the new order that we are already part of.

There have been of course, plenty of revolutions and regimes who have hankered after their own unique calendars. In establishing the secular time we count as ordinary, the Pope and the Emperor might have differed over detail, but if Pol Pot in 1970s Cambodia had his way, or the Republican Convention in 1790s France, the clock would have been reset to zero long ago. And if the Mayan calendar had conquered the Spanish one rather than vice versa, we would even now be on the dark side of a calendar *already* counted down to Year Zero in 2012, knowing *nothing* with any certainty...other than the fact it is 8th Week.

The truth is, for almost as long as we've been keeping record of time, kingdoms of one kind or another have mapped their place in the cosmos, their account of human history, their systems for ordering society onto the working miniature of the universe that is the calendar. And establishing a new calendar has always meant introducing a new society - determining either the foundations of your world, or the pinnacle or focal point to which its lives, and labours ascend...

In this latter respect, the Church's calendar is no different, as our reading from Micah makes evident.

The time is coming when, in the latter days, the nations shall stream to the mountain of the house of the Lord. The telos of our calendar tells *us* of the consummation - the zenith - of history, when the one we keep saying we believe 'will come again to judge the living and the dead' - the already enthroned King - will be revealed as Christ Pantocrator.

But whilst some calendars look back to the beginning, to a regime change, and some look forward to such a final Calends - when accounts fall due and debts are settled, the Church's calendar does both at once. And it

does more. Because how it begins, *is* how it ends, *and* - crucially - how it *proceeds* at every point: namely with the Coming of the One whose Presence confounds our notions of time as just a succession of chronological events, or an endless round of isolated moments.

Even by the daily details of our diaries, in patterns of office and Mass, of saints and seasons - we are being challenged to learn to see time - to live time - in the light of eternity, to generously handle what is finite in the light of the limitless self-gift of God, that is really present to us, *and* is still to come.

So, it is not insignificant that Christians have debated across the centuries whether the New Christian Year starts with the approach to December 25th and the Nativity, or with the very beginning of that advent on March 25th and the Annunciation. Those debates that gave us our April tax year are *about* the call to a new economy - the call embodied in Jesus' table-turning intrusion into the temple.

Nor is it an accident that those two dates scoop up Solstice and Equinox, because the recapitulation they concern is of cosmic proportions - the redemption of all the sun-swung zodiac - , and it involves, at every turn, the move our Advent Collect invokes - the shift from darkness to light, which is creation and recreation alike.

Nor again is it merely incidental that Irenaeus and others in the earliest centuries of the new era saw the Annunciation and Crucifixion as happening on the same day in the calendar - because the One who entered time (at the message of an angel) is the Eternal One - the Beginning and the End, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the earth, who is alive for evermore.

This holding together of events held apart by our chronologies, this folding together of time and eternity in our liturgies and our calendar is deliberate and inevitable, because it reflects the finite constructs of time and space bent into a new configuration by The Presence within them of the Infinite... By what is consequently a complete redefinition of what 'present' even means...

And so, we find ourselves face to face with the profound mystery represented in our Gospel - this regularly repeating passage that seems to belong in the Easter narrative, but here inaugurates the Christmas one - the mystery encapsulated in those words, which rightly take their place at the gates of the Nativity, *and* of the Passion,

"Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord."

These are the words that express His suddenly entering His own creation, suddenly coming into His temple, from the outside in. *And*, it is believed, the *same* words that greeted the High Priest emerging from the Holy of Holies at its centre, from the inside out, to pronounce atonement, and the restoration of the cosmos, at Yom Kippur.

These are the words our Gospel associates with the Feast of Tabernacles - the Seventh Feast that gathers up all the other feasts of Israel - which at once recalls the Exodus, and foreshadows the Olam HaBa - the world to come, whilst reminding those already inhabiting the promise, that they are still a nomadic people who cry 'Ho Sanna' - make your salvation manifest here and now; who call out 'Hosanna in the Highest' - bring us into the highest heaven, or bring to us the salvation that is the presence of the Most High. Or both - in the person of Messiah. These are the words with which the Church has strewn the approach to the Eucharist - the words that she has chosen to announce *that* 'advent of the Word made flesh', and our seemingly cyclical, but actually progressive, entering into His presence, and His entering into us.

Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord.

Not merely He that *has* come to us, past tense; not just He that *is* to come, future tense; but He that cometh - present continuous - He whose presence always takes the form of arriving.

In one sense, just as it is always Easter and always Christmas in the Christian year, for the same reason, it is always Advent. Because His is not a presence we can grasp or stow away, like the arrival of a letter, but a presence like a power-source newly cabled into our living room - actually there - but always *in* being there, a live connection to infinitely more of itself.

The Presence of the One that cometh in the Name of the Lord is always in the form of arriving - so it is always for us the time of preparation for His arrival. And because His advent is continual, it is continually re-presenting to us the same challenge:

Will you prepare His way? Will you prepare, by learning to *perceive* both His presence and his arriving? Will you - will we - be prepared *by* Him - to receive and respond *to* Him - to His coming in the flesh, in judgement, in our souls?

Just as the Church teaches that the Blessed Virgin Mary was a vessel made holy *by* Him to receive Him, and to experience his presence unfolding more and more in her life, until, finally, His uncontainable life took *her*

bodily into Itself. Just as the Temple was cleansed by His arrival in it, and was to be taken into Him, such that He, raising up its living stones, becomes bodily the eternal Temple of the New Jerusalem - so we are being prepared by His presence, for His advent, in the spiralling movement of penitence and love, of self-emptying and receiving which our liturgies and calendars frame, that culminates in his final descent, our ultimate ascent into the highest heavens.

We are called by the season of Advent, by the church year as a whole, to hold in sight the eternally renewed beginning, because its final end, and all of the way between the two, lies in the Most Holy Communion it has instigated, in the coming of heaven to earth, expressed in the Benedictus, Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord. And in the other half of the phrase the church has woven together in our time-warping Mass:

Holy, Holy, Holy.

The angel song lost to us in the fall, suddenly audible again with the blessed coming of Emmanuel; the angel song finally hymned as Micah prophesied, by every tribe and tongue and nation, and taken up, once the Lamb is enthroned, by the chorus in the Highest of every creature that is in heaven and in the earth and under the earth; the angel song we are actually already singing with them as we bow on earth, and know in one eternal moment the coming together of the secular and the celestial; as we give thanks for His Advent, *and* cry out 'Maranatha!' to 'the One that cometh'; as we are turned from darkness to light over and over until there is only light...taken in the passage of time from the merely temporary to the truly eternal...as we come to know ever more fully the present, as *presence* - the real presence of infinite love.

May we determine to learn this new way of telling time. May we discover on a daily basis that our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. May we resolve to hold open the door through which the eternal already streams - now in the time of our mortal life.