

The God of Surprises

Italian has two words for the future: *il futuro* and *l'avvenire*. The difference between the two words is quite subtle. *Il futuro* simply means the future. *L'avvenire* is a noun formed from the verb '*avvenire*' which means 'to happen, to occur'. *Futuro* refers to something that will come about and that develops from present circumstances. For instance, if I sow seeds I know that as a result of doing that now, seedlings and plants will result, I hope, in some weeks or months time. The future is predictable. But the *avvenire* refers to something that happens unexpectedly or as a surprise. We may know or suspect it will come, but have no clear idea when, so it always breaks in when we do not expect it, like winning the first prize in a raffle we had forgotten we'd entered, or like a solicitor's letter telling us we have been left a fortune by a distant relative we never knew we had.

Our word Advent to describe this lovely season we enter now has this same association. We know God is with us always in Jesus and in the Holy Spirit, but we also know or believe that one day we will be gathered up into the fullness of God's life, but we have no idea when that will be. We believe, as the Book of Revelation puts it, in a God 'who is, who was and who is to come', that is, in a God who will come to us out of a mysterious future. And while we understand this to mean, on one level, the mysterious coming of the Lord Jesus at the end of time, there are also advents that happen to us all the time, occasions when God touches us or breaks into our lives in extraordinary or unexpected ways. The great Jesuit spiritual writer, Gerard Hughes describes him as 'The God of Surprises'

Hughes once set off on a thousand mile walk from London to Rome. He wanted to see if he could do it while taking as little as possible with him, remembering what Jesus said when he sent out his disciples: "Take nothing for the journey; neither staff, nor haversack, nor bread, nor money; and let none of you take a spare tunic". He found that, although he might have no money in his pocket or not know when or how he would next eat or where he would spend the night, he was never left without food or shelter and always managed to find someone who would take pity on him and give him some money, buy him a meal or invite him to stay at their house or sleep in their shed. He relied solely on God's providence and God always came to his rescue in the shape of a Good Samaritan. A timely lift going his way, a friendly companion in a bar, a chatty old lady at a bus stop, even a curious child on a bike, were the catalysts providing for his needs on the journey. God's help came out of an uncertain future and from unexpected people and events. Having no idea what each day would bring, but trusting totally and implicitly in the goodness of God enabled him to recognise and identify the many 'advents', the many ways in which God breaks into the lives of those who believe in him for their good and well-being.

And not only those who believe in him. I remember once reading about a confirmed atheist who was caught in a thunderstorm. The cloudburst happened just as he was passing a church and he went inside for shelter. While he was there he experienced the most profound feeling of electricity and warmth flood his being followed by deep sense of peace and well-being. Somehow he knew he had experienced the powerful presence of God. Somehow he found himself tearfully pouring out his soul to a God he didn't believe in and finding his heart filled with indescribable joy and set on fire with a new energy and life he instantly knew came from God and was like nothing he had ever experienced before. From that moment he was a believer and his life was completely turned around by this spontaneous 'advent' of God.

Those of you who are doing or have done the Alpha course will have heard many testimonies of people whose lives of crime or corruption or debauchery or drug addiction have been completely turned upside down and transformed by a sudden and unexpected inbreaking of God - an advent they never saw coming and would never have believed possible had it not happened to *them* - rather like the experience of St Paul on the road to Damascus.

After many years, I have begun to recognise the many advents of God into my own life, the many ways God answers my prayers from day to day, how he upholds and supports me in difficult and fearful situations and sees me through them, how he can turn potentially negative experiences into positive ones, somehow unexpectedly bringing good out of them. As St Paul says in the Letter to the Romans, "We know that by turning everything to their good God co-operates with all those who love him, with all those that he has called according to his purpose". (Romans 8:28)

As we watch and wait this Advent season, let us try to train our spiritual senses to notice the many ways the Lord comes to us in our need with his comfort, love and consolation. The Lord comes to us at the most unexpected moments and in the least anticipated ways, so we do well to take to heart the advice of Matthew in today's Gospel: 'Therefore, you too must stand ready because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.' Bring it on!