

Advent and Christmas Lectionary Meditations

James Alison

These lectionary meditations are slightly edited versions of the texts written for, and published by, *The Christian Century* magazine for each of the six Sundays between 1st Sunday of Advent (2 December 2007) and Epiphany (6 January 2008). Following the normal practice of *The Christian Century* the readings which underpin these meditations are those of the Revised Common Lectionary rather than the Catholic lectionary.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 23, 2007

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

A vulnerable fulfilment

We are on the very brink of the Nativity. Our sense of the power of the One Coming in has been stretched, challenged, recast over the last three weeks. And now the reality of that power begins to dawn more clearly. And what is astonishing about it, is that unlike any power we know, this power is confident enough to be vulnerable. And that means confident enough in us to be vulnerable to us.

King Ahaz did not have the confidence to be vulnerable. He needed the appearance of strength to help him out in his military difficulties. Isaiah challenges him to imagine what God might be like, what it would look like for this Other who is totally other to put in an appearance – he can ask for the most outlandish sign from above or from below. Asking for a sign will reveal what sort of criterion Ahaz has for who God is. But what the Other might look like is only too likely to be disconcerting to Ahaz' political schemes. Ahaz doesn't really want a sign, dressing up his failure of imagination in an obedient piety.

Isaiah gives him a sign anyhow: and it is unlike anything that Ahaz has been encouraged to ask for. There is nothing outlandish about it. It doesn't appear to come from Heaven, nor to emerge from Sheol. It is quiet, gentle, ordinary-seeming. A maiden is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel. It would appear, at first glance to be totally natural, totally from this, human side of things, rather than emerging from something special, divine and

portentous. Thus it seems not really to be a sign at all. And yet, it is in this sign of quietude, and confidence that God will reveal himself as the one who loves his people, and who will bring his kingdom to flourishing. It is the sort of sign which is not able to be perceived by those whose attention is fixed on current affairs, on power politics and on strategic calculations.

Matthew has seen this in his Gospel. He has seen that Isaiah's promise of a sign relating to a kingdom flows into the much fuller sign which is happening now, quietly, and offstage. The fulness of the power pointed to by Isaiah was revealing itself in a gentleness made available under the most delicate of circumstances. For the maiden chosen to bear the son was not living in any well-protected enclave. On the contrary, the first thing which the power dared to do was to make itself visible as a provocation, inviting the maiden who was found to be with child to share the opprobrium of being a single mother in a society where such things might easily lead to death. She was to depend for her reputation, and maybe for her life, on the good will of an untested male who knew that he was not the father of the child.

What sort of power is it that allows itself to be so vulnerable? It is prepared to trust itself to one of the most notoriously unreliable features of human existence. Not merely the pain and riskiness of human gestation and childbirth. But also the whole of human skittishness around male honour, and the potential for violence which goes with female dependency. Beyond even this, as Matthew makes clear, this power is prepared to allow itself to be vulnerable to that most dangerous of constructs: the Law. For Joseph was a righteous man, and as such would know well what Deuteronomy 22 prescribed for cases like this: death by stoning. That Joseph's righteousness already consisted in his being inclined to interpret that law in the most gentle way possible, seeking to obey it by "putting her away quietly" was not something automatic.

Joseph decides to apply the law in this way, already a fragile act of interpretation, and one which it might not be at all easy to carry out in practice, since "secrets will out". This decision was made just prior to the Lord inviting Joseph to consider another possible interpretation: that Mary's pregnancy was not in any way something which fell foul of the Law, coming instead from the Holy Spirit. Joseph is given a dream, and in the light of that he is invited to make an interpretation with enormous practical consequences. Again: quite how extraordinary is the power that is gentle and confident enough to be able to enter into the practical consequences of a human act of interpretation? For there is no sign that is not also a human act of interpretation. And there can be no riskier way than this to enter into the realm of signs. This pregnant woman is either an

adulteress or a virgin blessed by God. What power is it that is prepared to trust that a human will choose the latter, infinitely less plausible interpretation, and then be so gracious as to cover over the vulnerability of his bride to be and allow the sign to flourish?

It is little wonder that Paul in Galatians emphasizes that Jesus was born under the Law, for Jesus' vulnerability to the Law is the sign of the power of the one who was to fulfil the whole purpose of the Law. This is all about power, as is made magnificently clear in the Introduction to Romans. The fulfilment of all God's promises would come through someone who was of the now failed and insignificant line of David. This one would be declared, or ordained the High Priest of God, God's Son, YHWH himself, bearing the Name by his passing through death in the spirit of holiness. Vulnerability to mere flesh; vulnerability to the Law; vulnerability to death: these will be the signs of the power of the One coming in, of his confidence in us, in what we can become, and in what he can make of us.