

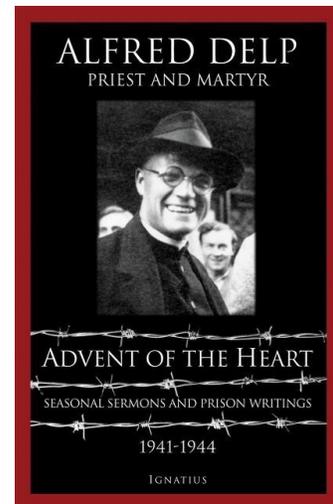
Advent 2015

Pondering the Coming of the Lord

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When I was preparing for an Advent day of meditation last year for the Edmundite community in Vermont one of my great discoveries... one of my great graces, to put it better... was encountering the thoughts of Fr. Alfred Delp, sj. During the weeks leading up to Advent last year, with thoughts of this day retreat foremost on my mind, I visited the Catholic bookstore in Halifax looking for a copy of the Advent edition of Living with Christ. Browsing through the store during my visit I discovered the Advent prison writings of Alfred Delp. It was entitled, 'Advent of the Heart: Seasonal Sermons and Prison Writings, 1941-1944.' Diving here and there into its pages I sensed the power many of his thoughts and images held. Here was a man meditating upon the coming of the Lord with hope, joy and a sense of peace while he was being held captive by the German Nazi government near the end of WWII. Delp's meditations upon what it means to wait upon the Lord during the darkness of the Advent season were seasoned by his experience of waiting for release from his captivity. In a season so full of cliches of common expressions and images of what Advent means, Delp's words and images were deeply personal, rooted in felt experience - and all the more powerful because of this. Here was a human being who was fully living the experience of Advent.

In the many writings on Advent we so often encounter thoughts of what Advent *should* be about. *How* we should enter into this season... especially in contrast to the near complete commercialization of the Christmas season. And then, suddenly, from the least likely of places - the depths of a dark and cold prison cell - one can be introduced to Advent with these words....



“Never have I entered on Advent so vitally and intensely alert as I am now. When I pace my cell, up and down, three paces one way and three the other, my hands manacled, an unknown fate in front of me, then the tidings of our Lord’s coming to redeem the world and deliver it have a different and much more vivid meaning.”

This one thought, this one startling image convinced me to buy this book. Here was the way to Advent that I was hoping I would encounter... a deeply heart-felt way that was spoken through profound personal experience. Admittedly the context of these Advent meditations are dark. But if we recall, the coming of the Lord was proclaimed from the very beginning of the Israelite people's own suffering - *because of* such darkness, *because of* such experiences. It is precisely to people such as Alfred Delp - in their very darkness - that the Lord is coming. It is precisely *for* such people that the Lord proclaims his coming through his prophets - Isaiah in particular:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to

the prisoners, to announce a year of favour from the LORD and a day of vindication by our God.

Isaiah 61

Alfred Delp was born in Mannheim, Germany in 1907. When he was 19 years old he entered the Society of Jesus, and was ordained a priest in 1937. Throughout his religious and spiritual formation Delp became more and more concerned with modern society's growing estrangement from God, leading to the kind of society in which he found himself - National Socialist (Nazi) Germany - a Fascist society deeply divorced from Christian meaning and values.



During the last years of the war Delp joined a group of multi-denominational German Christians to plan for a post-Nazi German society according to Christian social teaching. These efforts by deeply

committed German Christians would eventually lead to the formation of the Christian Democratic Union after the war - the party of future Chancellors Konrad Adenauer, Helmut Kohl, and presently, Angela Merkel. But during the days of the war the activities of these committed Christians was considered treasonous. With the failed attempt on Hitler's life in 1944 many of the persons working for a post-Nazi society were arrested, interrogated and imprisoned - including Alfred Delp.

It was during his imprisonment that Alfred Delp really grew into the spirit of Advent. With the help of friends on the outside Delp was given writing materials that were hidden in the delivery of his laundry. His written thoughts were then smuggled out in the same way, preserving them for our own Advent meditations.

Advent was one of the great themes that occupied Delp's faith life. His meditations on Advent come from different stages of his life, but they especially took on deeper meaning during the war years in the form of sermons to his congregation of Saint Georg's in Munich, and through the experiences of his imprisonment. To his congregation during the war he would write:

"Despite this gloomy time, with a certitude about life and faith, we have set up the Advent wreath, even though no one knows how long it will stand or whether all four of its candles will be lit. The course of the liturgical year and the message continues, and we keep on doing things. It comes from a sense of certitude about things and mankind and revelation. These give mankind the right to light candles and to believe in the light and brightness of existence. Not as if it were granted to us to erase all the gloominess! All the gloom must be gone through and endured. Yet, precisely for that reason, the lights of Advent should shine forth from within as we let ourselves be led to the insight that man is not under a law of imprisonment, enslavement, and threats."

Out of his deepening experiences of the war and own imprisonment Delp grew in his perception and faith in the spirit of Advent.... not in a willing blindness to all the devastation that was going on around him, but through a clear-sighted awareness that it was this devastation and darkness

where God's presence through Christ was most needed, that *this* was precisely the time to enter into the spirit of Advent. This was the kind of time Isaiah spoke of.

“The sounds of devastation and destruction, the cries of self importance and arrogance, the weeping of despair and powerlessness still fill the world. Yet, standing silently, all along the horizon are the eternal realities with their age-old longing. The first gentle light of the glorious abundance to come is already shining above them. From out there, the first sounds are ringing out like shepherds’ flutes and a boys’ choir singing. They do not yet form a song or melody - it is all still too far off and only the first announcement and intimation. Still, it is happening. This is today. And tomorrow the angels will relate loudly and jubilantly what has happened, and we will know it and will be blessed if we believed and trusted in Advent.”

In the midst of such darkness and despair how is one able to hear and see such revealed light and truth and put one's hope and faith in it, to live in it with a sense of peace, and even joy? For Delp the answer lay in openness and acceptance of God's mystery. If we can somehow surrender to God, God speaking deep within ourselves, and God the Creator and sustainer of our existence, we can recover the deepest meaning of our existence, no matter how dark it can get, and so hear and see the gentle light and voice of God's presence through it.

“We regain faith in our own dignity, our mission and our purpose in life precisely to the extent that we grasp the idea of our own life flowing forth within us from the mystery of God.”

In this Delp is saying to us that the promise of Advent is not a guarantee that something concrete will happen in our lives at some future time, such as his literal release from prison. It is a perception of the light of God in our very midst right now... the light of God already shining through our present darkness, a sense of one's present liberation even within the depths of a prison cell.

Accused of conspiring against the Nazi government, Delp was eventually put on trial, with little opportunity for defence. Because he could not be directly incriminated as a conspirator in the assassination plot of Hitler the charges were dropped. But Delp was still sentenced, on January 11, 1945 to death for high treason for his repudiation of National Socialist values. On February 2, 1945, at 37 years old, Delp was hung at Plotzensee prison in Berlin... just a few months before the end of the war.

The spirit of Advent did not guarantee his worldly survival, any more than it protected Christ from the cross in his own life. What the spirit of Advent did bestow upon Alfred Delp was the vision that life was not simply the darkness that had been descending all around him; life was also illuminated and sustained by the light of Christ in our lives - a light that could only grow brighter and brighter through our love and hope in it in its infancy.... and through our peace and joy in its continuing growth. What Alfred Delp teaches us is that the spirit and light of Advent shines forth *through* us - *through* our hope, love, peace, and joy. It is *through* the Advent spirit of Alfred Delp that the spirit of Advent itself can be witnessed.

