



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Advent of the Heart:
The Prison Meditations
of Alfred Delp, SJ
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 33-40)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Confronting the Powers
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 56-59)
- 📖 Prepare the Way of the
Lord
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 60-62)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Advent of the Heart

Condemned to die in a Nazi prison, Alfred Delp, SJ, discovered that Advent is the time for being deeply shaken—the time not only to remember the birth of the Christ Child, but also to participate in this unfolding and ultimate revelation of God that began in the Holy Night.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 21:25-33

Meditation†

Advent is a time of being deeply shaken, so that man will wake up to himself. The prerequisite for a fulfilled Advent is a renunciation of the arrogant gestures and tempting dreams with which, and in which, man is always deceiving himself...

But at the same time there is much more to Advent than this. The shaking is what sets up the secret blessedness of this season and enkindles the inner light in our hearts, so Advent will be blessed with the promises of the Lord.

Alfred Delp, SJ (1907-1945)

Scripture Reading: Revelation 3:7, 11-12

Reflection

Imprisoned in a Gestapo prison cell with his hands bound in chains, Alfred Delp managed to write Advent meditations—like the one above based on Luke 21:25-33—that he smuggled out to his Munich congregation with his dirty laundry. Jenny Howell writes, “Delp’s prison meditations are a penetrating account of the gutted society he lived in, where because of disordered lives—lives not properly ordered toward the God in whose image we are made—humankind was losing its very humanity. He believed Advent was the event through which order could be properly restored. This was his great hope.”

Delp was horrified by the concentration camps and by the condemnation of ministers who publicly prayed for their Jewish brothers and sisters or dared to criticize Hitler. “What was most horrifying to him was not only that these crimes were committed,” Howell notes, “but that those involved could do what they did without being shocked or surprised. It was the tragedy of what Delp called the ‘mass-men’—those with a dehumanized bureaucratic consciousness who could practice the greatest of evil with ritual as if it were somehow noble and intelligent, not seeing the absurdity, the horror, or sin of their actions.”

Howell highlights three themes in Father Delp’s remarkable Advent sermons and meditations:

- ▶ *Courageous honesty.* The first step toward what Delp calls “the Advent of the heart” is to squarely face the terrible reality of our distorted hearts and collective actions. “We must step down from the pedestals we are quick to raise for ourselves, from the vanity and self-grandeur with which we deceive ourselves,” Howell summarizes. This sort of honesty is necessary for our spiritual conversion, which makes possible what Delp calls “density of life”: life brimming with a joy that opens us to encounter the life of God.



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- ▶ *Authentic dreams.* God replaces false dreams that obscure reality and our own limits with true dreams that expand our horizon, calling us out of what Delp calls “the unthinking mass social order,” says Howell. Our lives become characterized, like John the Baptist’s, by “service and annunciation”: we do not inflate our own importance, but courageously point to the true Messiah through our worship and praise.
- ▶ *Glimpses of grace.* The visions that help us recognize evil and transform the world are not for the lone individual. “What [Delp] is writing about is a renewal of the entire social order. ‘Moments of grace,’ he writes, ‘both historical and personal are inevitably linked with an awakening and restoration of genuine order and truth.’ The road toward God leads us to become totally engaged in the historical task of the Body of Christ for the redemption of humanity and the world.”

Reflecting on his spiritual journey, Delp was grateful for even partial vision. “I know perfectly well the many sources from which joy can flow out to man—and that all these sources can also fall silent,” he writes. This kind of joy is not what sustains him. Rather, “It’s about that old theme of my life: man becomes healthy through the order of God and in nearness to God. That is also where he becomes capable of joy and happiness. Establishing the order of God, and announcing God’s nearness, and teaching it and bringing it to others: that is what my life means and wants, and what it is sworn to and abides by.”

Study Questions

1. How is the Advent season “a time of being deeply shaken”?
2. How is corrected “vision” in two senses—undistorted ways of seeing the world and proper dreams of hope for its salvation—central to Advent, according to Father Alfred Delp?
3. Delp saw his situation as a metaphor for the imprisoning depravity of the social order: “You have no key, and your door has no inner keyhole, and your window is barred and set so high that you cannot even look out. If no one comes and releases you, you will remain bound and poor in misery. All the mental struggles do not help at all.” How is the fourth O Antiphon, based on Revelation 3:7, a message of hope for us?
4. Discuss how Tosini’s *Saint John the Baptist* and Caravaggio’s *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* depict the prophet’s vigor and courage. How, according to Delp, is John the Baptist a model for our discipleship?

Departing Hymn: “O God Among Us, Come” (v. 4)

O Key of David, come.
Unlock what none shall bind,
and lock what none shall loose:
the captives in the darkness
imprisoned, now set free.

Latin, 8th century, tr. Robert B. Kruschwitz (2010)

Tune: O ANTIPHONS

† Alfred Delp, S.J., *Advent of the Heart: Seasonal Sermons and Prison Writings 1941-1944* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006), 23.

Advent of the Heart

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|--|--|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading: Luke 21:25-33 Meditation | Scripture Reading: Luke 21:25-33 Meditation |
| Scripture Reading: Revelation 3:7, 11-12 Reflection (skim all) | Scripture Reading: Revelation 3:7, 11-12 Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1, 2, and 3 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the startling Advent meditations of the Christian martyr, Father Alfred Delp.
2. To reflect on the meaning of the fourth messianic title in the O Antiphons – “Key of David.”
3. To discuss how John the Baptist’s vigor and courage are depicted in Christian art.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Advent Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

While Father Alfred Delp was locked in a Gestapo prison cell, “he returned again and again to John the Baptist’s life as an example of authentic and faithful living for his own chaotic and confusing generation,” Jenny Howell writes. “Outside his jail cell, the Third Reich launched their last futile offensive in the Ardennes. Defeat was certain for Hitler, though the Nazis refused to acknowledge this. Delp had long resisted the epic myth of the new Germany. In 1943, with the permission of his Religious Superior, Delp met with members of the Kreissau Circle – an anti-Nazi gathering of like-minded individuals who sought to envision and plan for a post-Nazi German society built on Christian virtues and practices. This was why Delp was imprisoned. To participate in such conversations was to deny the myth of Nazism – and this was high treason” (*Advent Ethics*, p. 34).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for grace to examine our hearts and our culture for deception, and to be open to receiving God’s truth in Christ Jesus.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 21:25-33 from a modern translation. (This passage is the basis for the meditation that follows.)

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Revelation 3:7, 11-12 from a modern translation. (This passage introduces the messianic title “Key of David” in the fourth “O Antiphon.”)

Reflection

This study introduces the remarkable Advent meditations that Father Alfred Delp, SJ (1907-1945), smuggled out of a Nazi prison. If members are not familiar with this twentieth-century Christian martyr, spend a few minutes reviewing his background story as it is told in Jenny Howell's article or on Internet resources like <http://ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-voices/20th-century-ignatian-voices/alfred-delp-sj/> or www.companymagazine.org/v211/delpajesuit.htm. If time permits, emphasize how Father Delp saw John the Baptist as an exemplar of faithful discipleship when one must confront the social order and rulers, and relate this characterization to the portrayals of John in the paintings by Michele Tosini and Caravaggio.

Study Questions

1. Delp draws the image of being “deeply shaken” from Luke 21:26. On the first Sunday of Advent each year, the Gospel reading focuses on Christ's prophecy of his second coming; Luke 21:25-33 is the reading for Year C. Anticipating Christ's return in judgment can “shake” us from our idolatrous trust in the current social order, which Delp calls “arrogant gestures and tempting dreams with which, and in which, man is always deceiving himself.”
2. Use the root idea of corrected vision to link the three themes Jenny Howell summarizes. The central problem of modern culture, Delp warns, is deception and comfortableness: we fail to recognize and challenge great evil in society around us. Advent shakes us to “see” our personal and collective sin, and courageously admit and humbly confess this to God; to embrace the liberating “dreams” of God's way of living that come as we worship and praise of God in community; and to be emboldened by “glimpses of grace” to act for God's kingdom.
3. The phrase “Key of David” derives from an obscure prophecy (Isaiah 22:20-25) concerning the promotion of Eliakim to replace Shebna, a pompous manager in King Hezekiah's household. Its use as a title for Christ begins with Revelation 3:7, the introduction of the letter that encourages the church at Philadelphia in Asia Minor to endure a sinfully distorted social order. (The image may be behind Christ's instructions on “binding” and “loosing” in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18). In the fourth “O Antiphon,” Christ is depicted as the Key of David who frees “captives in the darkness.” In the midst of a depraved society, Christ has provided the Philadelphian congregation an optional way of faithful living: “Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut” (3:9). As they live faithfully, Christ is incorporating them into God's life—a pillar in God's temple, a resident in the new city of Jerusalem that comes down from God's heaven (3:12).
4. Tosini portrays John the Baptist as a muscular young man. “This is in sharp contrast to other depictions of John the Baptist with an old and emaciated body, which encourage us to reflect on his hermetical life-style,” Heidi Hornik writes. “Tosini's painting emphasizes characteristics of innocence, determination, and strength—traits that served the young prophet well.... He reminds us of the great vigor and intensity required by John the Baptist's spiritual preparation and expectant waiting for the coming of the Christ....”

John the Baptist's strength of commitment is the focus of Caravaggio's painting in another way—as a martyr for forthrightly telling the truth in the face of societal injustice. In this way, his execution prefigures Christ's death. “The body of John lies on the ground like a sacrificial lamb that has been slaughtered,” Hornik notes. “The hairshirt, an iconic attribute of the saint, has its animal hooves placed near the Baptist's head to reinforce that his martyrdom paves the way for Christ's own sacrifice.”

Howell notes that for Father Delp, “John was the personification of Advent. In his prison meditations, he returned again and again to John's life as an example of authentic and faithful living for his own chaotic and confusing generation.” Delp surely identified with John's imprisonment and execution for prophetically confronting a depraved ruler. Yet he also identified with John's humility. Howell summarizes: “Just as John the Baptist confessed ‘I am not he’ to those followers who hoped he was the Savior of Israel (Acts 13:25), so we too must confess that we are not God, with the utmost of clarity and honesty. This is the beginning point for what Father Delp describes as ‘the Advent of the heart.’”

Departing Hymn

The piano accompaniment for the “O God Among Us, Come” is on pp. 64-65 of *Advent Ethics*. A version with the melody only is available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.