

Advent of the Heart: The Prison Meditations of Alfred Delp, SJ

BY JENNY HOWELL

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

I first encountered the work of Father Alfred Delp while enjoying the hospitality of the Christ in the Desert Monastery, where a group of Benedictine monks devote their lives to prayer, worship, and manual labor in the wild conditions of the Chama Canyon in New Mexico. Sitting at a heavy wooden desk in my simple room, I listened to the silence that is an essential component of the monks' way of life. The monastery, remote and removed, provided a startling silence broken only by the wind moving through the canyon, the twitter of the lark, and the haunting, mournful cries of a distant pack of coyotes.

Before the heat of the day overtook my brain, I read Father Delp's Advent meditations. While imprisoned in a Gestapo prison cell, awaiting his trial and inevitable execution, Delp wrote these meditations on slips of paper that he smuggled out to his Munich congregation with his dirty laundry. His hands were bound in chains, but he was able to wriggle one hand free enough to write. 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.

A VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

Spanning an entire wall in the refectory of Christ in the Desert Monastery is a beautiful painting of saints gathered at a feast table. In one corner of the painting, literally pasted on at a later date, stands the figure of John the Baptist. Before the monks sit down to break bread at the midday meal, they turn to John's image and sing a song of thanksgiving for his voice that cried out in the wilderness. Clothed in camel hair, eating sparsely of insects and honey in the ravages of harsh heat, John cried out, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Matthew 3:3). For his unwavering admonitions, he was ultimately imprisoned and executed. For the monks at Christ in the Desert Monastery, John the Baptist serves as an icon of their own vocation in the wilderness.

Like the monks, Father Delp also turned to John the Baptist's example as he faced his own wilderness. For him, 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. 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.

The heat of the desert or the chill of a jail cell are hardly the first images that come to mind when we think of Advent. But perhaps they should be. The cries to prepare for the coming of the Lord rise from the depths of solitude and speak to us, reminding us of what is real and what is true. For Delp, in Nazi Germany, the truth seemed but a faint and distant flicker of light.

Father Delp was overcome by the tragedy of the concentration camps, the executions of Christian leaders who publicly prayed for their Jewish brothers and sisters, and the condemnation of those who dared to criticize Hitler. What was most horrifying to him was not only that these crimes were possible, or that the crimes were committed, 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.

The hope that Delp held onto was that humanity could turn away from this collective self-deception and once again find its way to the Advent Road. "These are not matters that can be postponed to suit our convenience," Delp writes. "They call for immediate action because untruth is both danger-

ous and destructive. It has already rent our souls, destroyed our people, laid waste our land and cities; it has already caused our generation to bleed to death."¹

In his introduction to Father Delp's prison writings, Thomas Merton observes, "In these pages we meet a stern, recurrent foreboding that the 'voice in the wilderness' is growing fainter and fainter, and that it will soon not be heard at all. The world may sink into godless despair."² In this dire context Father Delp sees the season of Advent as the time for being deeply shaken, a time for humanity to wake up from the disembodied stupor it had been swallowed up into. Advent is the time not only to remember the birth of the Christ Child, but to participate in this unfolding and ultimate revelation of God that began in the Holy Night.

"We run the risk of concealing Christmas behind bourgeois customs and sentimentality, behind all those traditions that make this holiday dear and precious to us," Delp warns. "Yet perhaps the deep meaning is still hiding behind all those things. What this celebration is about is the founding of a final order for the world, a new center of meaning for all existence. We are not celebrating some children's holiday, but rather the fact that God has spoken His ultimate Word to the world. Christ is the ultimate Word of God to the world."³

ADVENT OF THE HEART

Throughout his sermons and meditations, Father Delp urged his congregation to be mindful of their present situation with a stark realism. It was a lie to say that the reality surrounding them was not as terrible as it seemed.

Father Delp encouraged them to turn and face the shocking destructiveness with courage, and acknowledge the truthful implications of untruth in society.

The temptation to live outside of or to escape the reality that surrounds us is very real. But Delp reminds us that history itself is the means of existence and the locus of God's self-revelation:

"Trying to live outside history

is lifelessness and a shadow existence. History is not *the* ultimate thing, but the Ultimate can be seen *only* in the context of history. Otherwise, life revolves around an idol that deceives; an idol with which we deceive ourselves and seek cheap consolation."⁴

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

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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.” The road of Advent shapes us into being more human. To seek God, to be caught up in the life of God, is humanity’s innermost purpose. The confession that we ourselves are not God is a first step to becoming who we truly are.

Service to others cannot be separated from the worship and praise of God. In worshipping God, we become clear-sighted and honest, with a selflessness that moves us toward a greater openness to God’s gifts in the world.

For Delp, Advent is the beginning of a quiet reflection on the self. Silence can be healing. The one who tries to evade solitude and confrontation with the unknown God may eventually be destroyed by the meaninglessness of mass society. But before that occurs, it is still possible to discover mysterious sources of hope and strength. We must have a willingness to step down

from the pedestals we are quick to raise for ourselves, from the vanity and self-grandeur with which we deceive ourselves. With this modesty comes the knowledge of boundaries, the knowledge of our true capabilities and potential. Rather than being restrictive, this knowledge brings forth a transformation of being, a conversion that generates deep freedom to live a life full of joy and possibility. Delp describes this as a “density of life”: life brimming with a joy that opens us to encounter the life of God.⁵

THE DREAMS WE DREAM

When we reclaim once again who we truly are, we begin to dream dreams. This is one of the first forms of resistance to becoming part of the unthinking mass social order. Some of these dreams are authentic creative dreams, visions that call us out of our tired, enslaved pace of habit. God’s call to us is always regenerative and creative. Dreams can increase the very reality within us that is called upon, precisely because of their realness. They expand our horizon, drawing us closer into the life of God. But, Delp warns, there are also false dreams—dreams that obscure reality and our own limits. These dreams do not extend our boundaries, but instead cause us to overstep them—a move that Delp warns can be deadly.

To help us discern whether the dreams we are experiencing are authentic impulses from God or foolish dreams, John the Baptist serves once again as the example. As Father Delp reflects, John the Baptist’s life personified “service and annunciation”: the voice crying in the wilderness came from a man who did not inflate his own importance, but rather pointed the way to the true Messiah.⁶

Service cannot be separated from the act of annunciation – the worship and praise of God. In the act of worshipping God, we become clear-sighted and honest. Intrinsic to this clear-sightedness and honesty is a selflessness that increases our openness to God’s gifts in the world. This was an Advent discovery that surprised Father Delp as he paced his prison cell in chains. Even in the midst of fear and doom, God’s messengers were present to him. “In the darkness of fear and death, the seeds of light were being sown.”⁷ In this openness, we find our truest freedom: a freedom from delusion, self-deterioration, and the cramping of the soul. This freedom leads us to a transcendence that is part of our very essence, a transcendence that allows us to move beyond our own finitude into an encounter with God.

The act of worship is crucial to our vocational call to service. For indeed, as Delp saw first-hand, some acts of service – when mildly and mundanely enacted, extracted from the authentic worship of God – can prove deadly. In the days after his own trial, he described the men present in the courtroom when his guilty verdict was released.

[They] were a bunch of ordinary, dutiful individuals who had put on their Sunday suits very ceremoniously for the occasion and took themselves very seriously indeed, sitting there in judgment.... They were good biddable SS men, obediently fulfilling the role of “the people” – which is to say “yes.”

...[T]heir faces are good-natured, average faces, very accustomed to this sort of thing, the average type representing “the” Germany.⁸

From the silence of his prison cell, Father Delp saw clearly that his own despairing and terrifying imprisonment was a metaphor for the imprisoning depravity and despair that ruled the entire social order.

You need to have sat in a small room with your hands in irons and have seen the shredded flag of freedom standing in the corner, in a thousand images of melancholy. The heart flees from these images again and again, and the mind strives to lift itself free, only to awaken even more sharply to reality at the next guard’s footsteps sounding in the hall and the next clanking of keys. Then you know that you are powerless. 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. This is a fact, a condition that exists and must be acknowledged.⁹

In his imprisonment, Delp realized the true state of humanity – poor, damaged, and incapable of managing life. “We sit,” he writes, “in musty bomb cellars and cramped prisons and groan under the bursting and destructive blows of fate.”¹⁰ He urged his congregation to quit giving a false glamour to

the myths that surrounded them, and to begin instead to bear it for what it is—an unredeemed life. True life is only possible through an intervention by God, who breaks open our prison, cancels our debt, and brings a blessing. Once this is done, the jangling of chains and the trembling of nerves and the faintness of heart transform themselves into a cry for refreshment from God. Once concrete reality is connected with the truth, then our lungs once again

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breathe in fresh air, our senses are reordered, the horizon again holds promise for us. Even in the mournful melodies of longing, there is joy for that which can and will come.

Once safely distanced from the calculation, mechanization, and organization of the “mass-men,” a wholesome and higher level of freedom is attained. Father

Delp reminds his congregation that true freedom is not merely the ability to make one choice rather than another. Freedom is not the ability to rebel. Rather, true freedom is an encounter with God. Our means of contributing to our own freedom are through the simple acts of honest humility, a readiness to serve, and the praise of God. This is the way of the Advent Road. The perspective we gain as we travel down this road provides a clearer vision of what lies ahead: the distress does not die, but the worry does; the burden does not disappear, but the faintheartedness does. When a person finally centers her life on an appropriate relationship with God, it is at this point that she truly begins to be. And in the consummation of this true life, long-lost or atrophied capabilities begin to grow. The eyes become brighter and keener. Even in times of shaking or quaking, certainty rises. The soul once again knows song, and with joy in the Lord, can once again sing “Alleluia!” “The voice of such a person,” Delp writes, “is not so quickly silenced.”¹¹

GLIMPSES OF GRACE

The light and truth that Father Delp describes are not only found in a lone individual. His vision is not for himself alone. What he 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.”¹² 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 this journey, Father Delp notes that even partial vision is sufficient for radiant happiness. This is the great mystery of life with God.

In spite of our own blurred vision and seeming incapacity for God, God is still with us; life with God is still possible. This is, in fact, our only hope. Yet the partial vision is only the beginning—the first breath. The “ever-greater” and “always-still-more” of eternity is shimmering through the cracks of creation and keeps life in a dynamic state. On the Advent Road, life moves toward the far horizon, expanding in its joyful content. “The promises of God stand above us, more valid than the stars and more effective than the sun. Based on these promises, we will become healthy and free, from the center of our being. The promises have turned us around and, at once, opened life out into the infinite.”¹³

He wonders: can joy be found here on earth? Of course! Joy can be experienced in the blooming of flowers, in a meeting with a true friend, in the sun, or the movement of water. There are joyful emotions that mean we are capable of truly loving and truly suffering. The earth, as well as heaven, can be a great occasion for joy. “I know perfectly well the many sources from which joy can flow out to man—and that all these sources can also fall silent.” That kind of joy is not what Father Delp sought to write about. 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.”¹⁴

When Father Delp finally received his condemnation to death, he was surprised by his own surprise. Of course the outcome was inevitable, he mused, but how difficult to accept when his very nerves “tingled with life.” He did not embrace death passively. “To be quite honest I don’t want to die, particularly now that I feel I could do more important work and deliver a new message about values that I have only just discovered and understood. But it has turned out otherwise.”¹⁵ One thing was gradually becoming clear: Father Delp knew he must surrender himself completely. “This is seed-time, not harvest. God sows the seed and some time or other he will do the reaping. The only thing I must do is to make sure the seed falls on fertile ground,” he writes. “May others at some future time find it possible to have a better and happier life because we died in this hour of trial.”¹⁶

Even in the last bits of writing he was able to smuggle out of his jail cell, Father Delp sustained a hope that transcended his own life. His hope rested on the belief that Christians would still be able to hear the Advent voice crying from the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord!”

NOTES

1 Alfred Delp, SJ, *Prison Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004; reprint of New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), 23.

2 Thomas Merton, “Introduction,” *Prison Writings*, xxvii.

3 Alfred Delp, SJ, *Advent of the Heart: Seasonal Sermons and Prison Writings 1941-1944* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 135.

4 *Ibid.*, 144.

5 *Ibid.*, 108.

6 *Ibid.*, 109.

7 This is Thomas Merton's summary in "Introduction," *Prison Writings*, xxxiv.

8 *Prison Writings*, 156.

9 *Advent of the Heart*, 112-113.

10 *Ibid.*, 114.

11 *Ibid.*, 115.

12 *Prison Writings*, 24.

13 *Advent of the Heart*, 117.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Prison Writings*, 160-161.

16 *Ibid.*, 160.



JENNY HOWELL

is a Ph.D. candidate in Theology at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.