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## The Shaking Reality of Advent

*Alfred Delp*

*Condemned as a traitor for his opposition to Hitler, Father Alfred Delp, a Jesuit priest, wrote this piece in a Nazi prison shortly before he was hanged in 1945.*

**THERE IS PERHAPS NOTHING** we modern people need more than to be genuinely shaken up. Where life is firm we need to sense its firmness; and where it is unstable and uncertain and has no basis, no foundation, we need to know this too and endure it.

We may ask why God has sent us into this time, why he has sent this whirlwind over the earth, why he keeps us in this chaos where all appears hopeless

and dark and why there seems to be no end to this in sight. The answer to this question is perhaps that we were living on earth in an utterly false and counterfeit security. And now God strikes the earth till it resounds, now he shakes and shatters; not to pound us with fear, but to teach us one thing – the spirit's innermost moving and being moved.

Many of the things that are happening today would never have happened if we had been living in that movement and disquiet of heart which results when we are faced with God, the Lord, and when we look clearly at things as they really are. If we had done this, God would have withheld his hand from many things that have stirred up and shaken and crushed our lives. We would have seen the inner authorities, we would have seen and judged the limits of our own competence.

But we have stood on this earth in false pathos, in false security; in our spiritual insanity we really believed we could, with the power of our own hand and arm, bring the stars down from heaven and kindle flames of eternity in the world. We believed that with our own forces we could avert the dangers and banish night, switch off and halt the internal quaking of

the universe. We believed we could harness everything and fit it into a final order that would stand.

Here is the message of Advent: faced with him who is the Last, the world will begin to shake. Only when we do not cling to false securities will our eyes be able to see this Last One and get to the bottom of things. Only then will we be able to guard our life from the frights and terrors into which God the Lord has let the world sink to teach us, so that we may awaken from sleep, as Paul says, and see that it is time to repent, time to change things. It is time to say, "All right, it was night; but let that be over now and let us be ready for the day." We must do this with a decision that comes out of these very horrors we have experienced and all that is connected with them; and because of this our decision will be unshakable even in uncertainty.

If we want to transform life again, if Advent is truly to come again – the Advent of home and of hearts, the Advent of the people and the nations, a coming of the Lord in all this – then the great Advent question for us is whether we come out of these convulsions with this determination: yes, arise! It is time to awaken from sleep. It is time for a waking up to begin

somewhere. It is time to put things back where God the Lord put them. It is time for each of us to go to work, with the same unshakable sureness that the Lord will come, to set our life in God's order wherever we can. Where God's word is heard, he will not cheat our life of the message; where our life rebels before our own eyes he will reprimand it.

The world today needs people who have been shaken by ultimate calamities and emerged from them with the knowledge and awareness that those who look to the Lord will still be preserved by him, even if they are hounded from the earth.

The Advent message comes out of an encounter of man with the absolute, the final, the gospel. It is thus the message that shakes – so that in the end the world shall be shaken. The fact that then the Son of man shall come is more than a historic prophecy; it is also a decree, that God's coming and the shaking up of humanity are somehow connected. If we are inwardly unshaken, inwardly incapable of being genuinely shaken, if we become obstinate and hard and superficial and cheap, then God will himself intervene in world events and teach us what it means to be placed in this agitation and be stirred inwardly.

Then the great question to us is whether we are still capable of being truly shocked or whether it is to remain so that we see thousands of things and know that they should not be and must not be, and that we get hardened to them. How many things have we become used to in the course of the years, of the weeks and months, so that we stand unshocked, unstirred, inwardly unmoved.

Advent is a time when we ought to be shaken and brought to a realization of ourselves. The necessary condition for the fulfillment of Advent is the renunciation of the presumptuous attitudes and alluring dreams in which and by means of which we always build ourselves imaginary worlds. In this way we force reality to take us to itself by force – by force, in much pain and suffering.

This shocked awakening is definitely part of experiencing Advent. But at the same time there is much more that belongs to it. Advent is blessed with God's promises, which constitute the hidden happiness of this time. These promises kindle the inner light in our hearts. Being shattered, being awakened – only with these is life made capable of Advent. In the bit-

terness of awakening, in the helplessness of "coming to," in the wretchedness of realizing our limitations, the golden threads that pass between heaven and earth in these times reach us. These golden threads give the world a taste of the abundance it can have.

We must not shy away from Advent thoughts of this kind. We must let our inner eye see and let our hearts range far. We will encounter the earnestness of Advent and the blessing of Advent in a different way. We will see characters, completed and whole personalities, that belong to these days and to all days – characters in whom the Advent message and the Advent blessing simply exist and live, calling out to us and touching us to cheer and shake us, to console and to uplift us.

I am referring to characters that live in these days and all days. The types I mean are these three: the Angel of Annunciation, the Blessed Woman, and the Crier in the Wilderness.

*The Angel of Annunciation.* I see Advent this year with greater intensity and anticipation than ever before. Walking up and down in my cell, three paces this way and three paces that way, with my hands in

irons and ahead of me an uncertain fate, I have a new and different understanding of God's promise of redemption and release.

This reminds me of the angel that was given to me two years ago for Advent by a kind person. The angel bore the inscription, "Rejoice, for the Lord is near." The angel was destroyed by a bomb. A bomb killed the man who gave it to me, and I often feel he is doing me the service of an angel.

The horror of these times would be unendurable unless we kept being cheered and set upright again by the promises that are spoken. The angels of annunciation, speaking their message of blessing into the midst of anguish, scattering their seed of blessing that will one day spring up amid the night, call us to hope. These are not yet the loud angels of rejoicing and fulfillment that come out into the open, the angels of Advent. Quiet, inconspicuous, they come into rooms and before hearts as they did then. Quietly they bring God's questions and proclaim to us the wonders of God, for whom nothing is impossible.

For all its earnestness, Advent is a time of inner security, because it has received a message. Oh, if it

ever happens that we forget the message and the promises; if all we know is the four walls and the prison windows of our gray days; if we can no longer hear the gentle step of the announcing angels; if our soul no longer is at once shaken and exalted by their whispered word – then it will be all over with us. We are living wasted time and are dead before they do us any harm.

The first thing we must do if we want to be alive is to believe in the golden seed of God that the angels have scattered and still offer to open hearts. The second thing is to walk through these gray days oneself as an announcing messenger. So many need their courage strengthened, so many are in despair and in need of consolation, there is so much harshness that needs a gentle hand and an illuminating word, so much loneliness crying out for a word of release, so much loss and pain in search of inner meaning. God's messengers know of the blessing that the Lord has cast like seed into these hours of history. Understanding this world in the light of Advent means to endure in faith, waiting for the fertility of the silent earth, the abundance of the coming harvest. Not

because we put our trust in the earth but because we have heard God's message and have met one of God's announcing angels ourselves.

*The Blessed Woman.* She is the most comforting of all the Advent figures. Advent's holiest consolation is that the angel's annunciation met with a ready heart. The Word became flesh in a motherly heart and grew out far beyond itself into the world of God-humanity. What good does it do us to sense and feel our misery unless a bridge is thrown over to the other shore? What help is it to be terrified at our lostness and confusion unless a light flashes up that is a match for darkness and always is its master? What good does it do to shiver in the coldness and hardness in which the world freezes as it goes deeper astray in itself and kills itself, unless we also come to know of the grace that is mightier than the peril of oblivion?

Poets and myth-makers and mankind's other tellers of stories and fairy tales have often spoken of mothers. One time they meant the earth; another time they meant nature. By this word they tried to disclose the mysterious creative fount of all things, to conjure up the welling mystery of life. In all this

there was hunger and anticipation and longing and Advent – waiting for this blessed woman.

That God became a mother's son; that there could be a woman walking the earth whose womb was consecrated to be the holy temple and tabernacle of God – that is actually earth's perfection and the fulfillment of its expectations.

So many kinds of Advent consolation stream from the mysterious figure of the blessed, expectant Mary. The gray horizons must grow light. It is only the immediate scene that shouts so loudly and insistently. Beyond these things is a different realm, one that is now in our midst. The woman has conceived the child, sheltered it beneath her heart, and given birth to the Son. The world has come under a different law. We are not speaking of only historical events that happened once, on which our salvation rests. Advent is the promise denoting the new order of things, of life, of our existence.

We must remember today with courage that the blessed woman of Nazareth foreshadows the light in our midst today. Deeper down in our being, our days and our destinies, too, bear the blessing and mystery

of God. The blessed woman waits, and we must wait too until her hour has come.

*The One Who Cries in the Wilderness.* Woe to an age when the voices of those who cry in the wilderness have fallen silent, outshouted by the noise of the day or outlawed or swallowed up in the intoxication of progress, or growing smothered and fainter for fear and cowardice. The devastation will soon be so terrifying and universal that the word "wilderness" will again strike our hearts and minds. I think we know that.

But still there are no crying voices to raise their plaint and accusation. Not for an hour can life dispense with these John-the-Baptist characters, these original individuals, struck by the lightning of mission and vocation. Their heart goes before them, and that is why their eye is so clear-sighted, their judgment so incorruptible. They do not cry for the sake of crying or for the sake of the voice. Or because they begrudge earth's pleasant hours, exiled as they themselves are from the small warm companionships of the foreground. Theirs is the great comfort known only to those who have paced out the inmost and furthest boundaries of existence.

They cry for blessing and salvation. They summon us to our last chance, while already they feel the ground quaking and the rafters creaking and see the firmest of mountains tottering inwardly and see the very stars in heaven hanging in peril. They summon us to the opportunity of warding off, by the greater power of a converted heart, the shifting desert that will pounce upon us and bury us.

O Lord, today we know once more, and in quite practical terms, what it means to clear away the rubble and make paths smooth again. We will have to know it and do it for years to come. Let the crying voices ring out, pointing out the wilderness and overcoming the devastation from within. May the Advent figure of John, the relentless envoy and prophet in God's name, be no stranger in our wilderness of ruins. For how shall we hear unless someone cries out above the tumult and destruction and delusion?

Advent comes in these three figures. This is not meant as an idyllic miniature painting, but as a challenge. My real concern is not with beautiful words, but with the truth. Let us kneel therefore and ask for the threefold blessing of Advent and its threefold inspiration.

Let us ask for clear eyes that are able to see God's messengers of annunciation; for awakened hearts with the wisdom to hear the words of promise. Let us ask for faith in the motherly consecration of life as shown in the figure of the blessed woman of Nazareth. Let us be patient and wait, wait with Advent readiness for the moment when it pleases God to appear in our night too, as the fruit and mystery of this time. And let us ask for the openness and willingness to hear God's warning messengers and to conquer life's wilderness through repentant hearts. We must not shrink from or suppress the earnest words of these crying voices, so that those who today are our executioners will not tomorrow become accusers because we have remained silent.

Let us then live in today's Advent, for it is the time of promise. To eyes that do not see, it still seems that the final dice are being cast down in these valleys, on these battlefields, in those camps and prisons and bomb shelters. Those who are awake sense the working of the other powers and can await the coming of their hour.

Space is still filled with the noise of destruction and annihilation, the shouts of self-assurance and

arrogance, the weeping of despair and helplessness. But just beyond the horizon the eternal realities stand silent in their age-old longing. There shines on us the first mild light of the radiant fulfillment to come. From afar sound the first notes as of pipes and singing boys, not yet discernible as a song or melody. It is all far off still, and only just announced and foretold. But it is happening. This is today. And tomorrow the angels will tell what has happened with loud rejoicing voices, and we shall know it and be glad, if we have believed and trusted in Advent.