

The Vision of Faith

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The Advent season calls to our consciousness the end of history; to the realization that history has an end; that our personal history as well as the history of the world and humanity are moving toward a terminus, a final moment.

If we can resist the insistence of the commercial world that the Christmas season begins before Thanksgiving and make space and time for the keeping of Advent, we will find rich resources for reflection on the biblical themes of the end of history. There is great curiosity about the “Last Things” and all too little calm and reasoned discussion about these matters of faith. Advent, properly kept, provides the opportunity to be reminded that the Christ who came is the Christ who is coming and to treat those questions which continue to live in the human mind and heart: What is the point of it all, this human drama? Where is it all going—whither the whole? What happens at death? What about heaven and hell, judgment and salvation? What do you mean by eternal life?

In the autumn of 1983 I was involved in a seminar at the University of Michigan with Professor Hans Küng, who gave a series of lectures entitled “Eternal Life?” Standing in the center of that great secular institution of learning where there is but a token recognition of the whole sphere of religion, he spoke without apology on the themes of death, life after death, hell, heaven, and the kingdom of God. It was a fascinating experience to witness, not only because of the great depth of his discussion, but because there in the sophistication of this great university there were hundreds of bright young people eager to learn about life’s ultimate issue.

This is simple witness to the fact that we can never be content to be born, to live out our days, and to die without asking why, whence, whither. God has put eternity into our hearts. When life has been experienced with its full spectrum of activities the question arises, “Is this all there is?” The biblical faith answers, “No, there is much more.” Reflecting the biblical teaching, Küng concluded his lectures

after a careful and thorough examination of the questions from medical, religious, and philosophical perspectives with this affirmation of faith:

To believe in an eternal life means—in reasonable trust, in enlightened faith, in tried and tested hope—to rely on the fact that I shall one day be fully understood, freed from guilt and definitively accepted and can be myself without fear; that my impenetrable and ambivalent existence, like the profoundly discordant history of humanity as a whole, will one day become finally transparent and the question of the meaning of history one day be finally answered.

That is a well-packed statement. It says in capsule form what Advent faith teaches. Advent means “coming.” Advent means Jesus is coming; God's kingdom is coming; consummation is coming.

Test Küng's statement by this most familiar word from St. Paul.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide... (1 Cor. 13:12-13).

These are familiar words coming at the end of Paul's “hymn of love.” We rarely recognize the fascinating future reference of his declaration, but in this great statement we find acknowledged both the puzzle that is our history and the vision of our Christian faith. Let these words of the apostle provide our Advent reflection as we realize anew that God calls us to live trusting that he will fulfill his promises and bring his kingdom to its consummation.

We must acknowledge the ambiguity of our present state. Is it not our common experience that a veil of mystery hangs over our lives and over history as a whole? It is impossible from an observation of the course of history to find history's meaning, to detect purpose, direction, and goal. We are caught up in the stream of history itself; we swim in the stream. We have no privileged position above history from which to survey it.

There are those who deny any detectable meaning. H. A. L. Fisher, in his *History of Europe*, writes:

One intellectual excitement, however, has been denied to me. Men wiser and more learned than I have discovered in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following another, as wave follows upon wave, only one great fact with respect to which, since it is unique, there can be no generalizations, only one safe rule for the historian: that he should recognize in the development of human destinies the play of the contingent and the unforeseen.

That is an excellent statement of the case by an eminent historian. From the study of history itself the conclusion is that it is “the development of the contingent and the unforeseen.”

St. Paul admitted the same. If history itself be our focus or, more narrowly, the data of our personal histories, then, “we see in a mirror dimly.” For Paul, however, it is not only the data of history with which we have to do, but also the revelation of God in the history of Israel and in Jesus. Thus we bring something to history: the knowledge of the revelation of God. That revelation, which found its supreme expression in Jesus, embraced by faith becomes the interpretative principle by which we understand history.

There is more to come. Paul went on to write: “Then [we shall see] face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been understood fully.”

The meaning of history will be accessible to us only from history’s end. Paul believed that just as there was a beginning, so there will be an end. He who spoke and brought all things into being will speak yet again, and time will be no more.

As another Advent season comes around, we realize anew that we are faced with a choice, a decision: Will we live by faith in God’s promise or not?

To do so is a decision, not a conclusion at the end of rational argument. Trust is necessary; not irrational trust but reasonable trust, trust as a decision of the whole person.

Fundamental trust will live in the assurance of a gracious purpose threading its way through the confusing patterns of history. Such trust is a gift. Its foundation is laid in earliest infancy. We are from the beginning being pointed toward trust or mistrust. As an adult it is only through a significant emotional experience that one can move from mistrust to trust. An encounter with Jesus is the catalyst for a life lived in trust. Such trust is confirmed in experience; yet it always remains trust, an experience beyond verification in the scientific sense of verification.

Mistrust is an option. It is the consistent position of atheism. The Nobel Prize-winning biologist, Jacques Monod, an atheist, maintains:

If he accepts this (negative) message in its full significance, man must at last wake out of his millenary dream and discover his total solitude, his fundamental isolation. He must realize that, like a gypsy, he lives on the boundary of an alien world; a world that is deaf to his music, and as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his sufferings or his crimes (*Chance and Necessity*, p. 160).

That is an excellent statement representing clear, concise thinking. As an atheist, Monod is consistent. If there be no God, then there is no future resolution of

history's confusion, no future righting of wrong, no future realization of our hopes, dreams, and longing.

If this be an impersonal universe with no heart, no mind at the center, no purpose at the beginning, and no consummation at the end, then it is true the universe is deaf to our music, indifferent to our hopes, our sufferings, our crimes.

If, on the other hand, we bring trust to history's puzzling data, then we live in the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Finally, we must choose. The vision of faith sees beyond history's puzzle to the promise of his coming, who came to a people who had for centuries cried, "How long, O Lord, how long?" He has come. His promise is he will come again, scattering the darkness, revealing the eternal purposes of God which now are hidden from clear view.

To keep Advent is to keep faith in the promises of God.

The mystery will be removed and we will understand.

Faith will be vindicated as the king comes and the kingdom comes to consummation.