

November 30, 2008

Perhaps some of you have seen the recent TV advertisements for Cash Converters. The one which caught my interest struck me as quite a brilliant consumerist reworking of a well-known saying of the French philosopher Blaise Pascal. Pascal said that we each have within us a God-shaped vacuum which, by definition, only God can fill. The variation of this you can see on late-night TV is the portrayal of men and women wandering into a Cash Converters shop, each on sporting a hole in their middle. The hole, of course, is not God-shaped, but shaped like a hair-dryer, or an electric drill, or a football, or a guitar, or shaped like anything else you might be able to buy at Cash Converters. The implication, of course, is that having bought this thing, the consumer is now complete, and no longer *has* a hole but is *made* whole by the thing they have purchased.

It's a clever piece of advertising. Yet part of the cleverness is that at the same time it is like most other such advertising – it almost passes unnoticed, so attuned are we to the *general* suggestion being made. We might reject this or that *particular* suggestion about *what* we ought to buy, or object to the *way* in which the suggestion is made, but it's quite a different thing altogether to free ourselves from the thought that when we *do* buy we are in fact filling such a hole, for our economic system – and consequently we ourselves – is largely predicated on the notion of scarcity and competition for the things we need or want. To acquire is tend to the scarcity, to fill ourselves up.

Talk of filling holes in our lives has to do with desire and longing. There is a book in our local library on the subject of "catalogue design".¹ This book is concerned with the most effective ways of laying out the advertising material which appears in our mail boxes with ever-increasing frequency at this time of the year. Much more interesting than the subject of the book, however, is what is implied by its subtitle: "the art of creating desire". "*Creating desire*" – is this not an interesting concept? On the one hand, when we think of desire, we tend to think of something which is already "there". I suspect that most of us imagine that we desire because we desire, not because someone has created such desires in us. Desire is already there and needs only to be fulfilled or, in some cases, to be resisted, if we have moral reservations about the effect of meeting some of our desires. On the other hand, the notion of "creating desire" alerts us to a darker side of our economic system, in which desire itself is the thing most desired. This is because when we desire, we can be persuaded to consume. And consumption is good for the economy. Creating desire, then, creates consumption, creates prosperity. But we're

also well aware that this is scarcely a sustainable model of prosperity.

There is much which human beings desire, or long for. Towards one end of the scale, perhaps, we know the strong hormonal pull of sexual desire; towards the other end is the much more subtle but no less compelling desire for security against the many powers which bear in upon us. We can speak of our desires in such general terms as a longing for respect or security or opportunity, or in more specific terms such as the desire for close personal relationships, good health, money, children, a safer car or a higher fence around our home. Either way, we might indeed imagine these things as holes cut into the fabric of our being, and our lives as a search to find things to fit those holes.

Advent is a season which has to do with desire and longing. Each year the gospel readings follow a similar pattern – first an apocalyptic vision of the coming of the Son of Man, as we heard this morning, then the preaching of John the Baptist and finally, as a word of fulfilment, the account of the Annunciation to Mary or of the birth of Jesus. Promise, imminence and fulfilment are the themes of the Advent gospel readings each year.² This cluster of ideas has to do with human desire and longing. "Promise" relates to what we yet lack; "imminence" invites preparation to receive; "fulfilment" is the delivery.

Yet the desires and longings at the heart of these readings are those of a particular people in particular circumstances. At the beginning of our service we heard an extraordinary expression of desire (Isaiah 64.1) – Lord, that you would tear open the heavens and come down! In a moment we will hear from the psalmist (80.1-7): Lord God, how long will you be angered?; you have fed your people with the bread of tears; stir up your strength and come to help us; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

It is to this kind of longing that the readings, and the season, of Advent attempt a response. Those who speak such things as the psalmist have exhausted their options and found themselves beyond their own saving. To such a people as these

² Strangely, though the readings seem to progress from the prophecy of the coming of the Son of Man, to the preaching of his imminent arrival by the Baptist, to the birth of Jesus, in fact these readings have the opposite historical order – it is Jesus who forth-tells the coming of the Son, actually after the Baptist preaches, which is long after the birth of Jesus.

¹ Edwards and Valentine, *Catalogue design: the art of creating desire*.

the words of our gospel reading this morning come as good news:

[Jesus said to his disciples,] "In those days, after that suffering,

*the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven (Mark 13.24ff).

The language and the imagery – the cosmology – is odd to our modern ears, but we ought not to let this distract us. Jesus is attempting to speak of something which the language will not bear; this is the source of the strangeness of what he says, and not the imagery he uses. The temptation is strong with these texts to read them "literally",³ and either to reject them, or to believe them, according to their surface sense. But it is because Jesus speaks of seemingly impossible things that his language is so strange to us. This impossibility is not that the Son of Man might appear on the clouds, or that the sun will be darkened and the stars fall from heaven. The impossibility is not the bad science which this implies but the seeming impossibility that human desire might be satisfied, and that *Jesus himself* might be the true "desire of nations" (Haggai 2.7 [AV]).

The apocalyptic thought of Jesus' time was concerned with the rupturing of the order of the present age. It had to do with the eradication of injustice, scarcity and the endlessness of insatiable human desire. It spoke about this in quite concrete and historical terms because it arose from a very concretely and historically thinking people. We don't have to think in that way, or look for what they looked for in terms of historical events, but we *do* have to hear what they heard and intended *under* the imagery: that the desires which matter, the ones the fulfilment of which would make us our true selves before God, this is something God is moving to bring about.

I suspect that for most of us, the force and focus of the desires expressed in by Isaiah and the psalmist today are not such that we could claim them as our own. Our lives tend to be filled with *confused* desires, some "real" and others "created". Unlike the psalmist, we lack clarity in our longings, for our desires are in constant conflict. We long for the fulfilling gentleness of close human relationships, but are fearful of the cost of such relationships. We

³ Which, it seems, rarely means "as literature"!

desire prosperity and wealth but at the same time long for freedom from the harsh competitiveness upon which we depend to create that wealth for us.

In the midst of that confusion, our gospel reading today takes on a threatening tone: Beware! Keep alert! Stay Awake! For you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly! This is not good news for those who are not sure that they will be ready when God comes. That is, this prophecy will create for us a moral anxiety: have we desired the wrong things?

There is nothing wrong with desire in itself. Absence not only makes the heart grow fonder, it can make the heart courageous and adventurous, and cause us to go places we might otherwise never even have considered going, let alone dared to go. But these readings suggest to us that, indeed, there is an "art of creating desire", although the right kind of desire. Such a creation of desire is not a matter of trying to persuade ourselves that we really do want God to come into our lives; this could simply be self-delusion. The true art of creating desire is perhaps more one of *cultivating* desire, a matter of learning that the longing cry of the psalmist is indeed our own, and coming to claim it as our own.

Those of you who play stringed instruments know that the strings will sound not only when you strike them with finger or bow, but also when another string tuned to the same pitch is sounded. The movement of the air by the struck string causes the second string to resonate – literally to "re-sound" with the same tone. Our lives with their conflicted and competing desires are like a violin badly out of tune, and so largely unresponsive – un-resonate – when heaven sounds forth. To cultivate the desires which matter is to allow God to adjust the tension on the strings through reflection on scripture, prayer and growing into a life of service, that with time we might be found to be more in tune not only with God but also with our true selves.

It may be said that we are *created* for desire. But, quite distinct from the insatiable desires which typically drive us, the desire for which we are created can indeed be met because God is a match for it, a rest which truly meets our restlessness.

This God comes not to threaten us because we have desired, but to uncover our true desire, to reveal that desire to us, and to meet it.

We do well if this Advent we turn again to prayer, asking that God teach us to desire, tuning us to his song, that we might be freed *from* false and empty longing and freed *for* the hope which will not be disappointed, the coming of the God who brings us our hearts' desire. By the grace of God may we so turn in prayer, and be met with his faithful "Yes" in Jesus Christ his Son. Amen.