

# The Baby and the Clay

The Christian year begins with Advent, which means “arrival”. It is a time to wait for holiness to arrive as a baby, the child who comes to be known as Jesus Christ. From our perspective, Advent is a time of waiting, but from God’s perspective, it is a time of arrival. And through both our waiting and God’s arriving, the Christ child is born into our world and into our hearts. What a marvellous time of year, and what a challenge! Before we celebrate Christ’s birth, we must prepare our hearts to welcome him. So, how are you going to spend the Season of Advent, the four-week period leading to Christmas? How are you preparing for the sacred gift of the Christ child?

We have a clue from today’s passage, which comes from a later point in the book of the prophet – what some scholars refer to as Third Isaiah. The exile in Babylon is over. People have returned to the land. Now is the time for rebuilding the community in Jerusalem. It is an awkward settling-in period, probably between the rebuilding of the Temple and the revival of temple worship. It is a kind of in-between time in the life of the people, which resonates with the kind of in-between time that Advent is for us.

This passage reaffirms the wondrous and salvific promises of God, but declares that things are not even close to salvific yet. The Bible says, in Isaiah 64:6-7, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; *for you have hidden your face from us*, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.” Isaiah’s statement appears to be a ‘the-chicken-or-the-egg’ question. Did the people cause God to get angry and hide from them, or did the absence of God cause the people to do unrighteous things? For whatever reason, what they are experiencing now is far from what they experienced before, as stated in verse 2, “When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.”

In Advent, we reaffirm that God is coming to us in Jesus Christ, that the wise men are on the move, that the angelic chorus is warming up, that the shepherds are feeling inexplicably restless, and that Mary is wondering and waiting. But our lives seem far away from the immense change that swept their lives; we do experience God's absence; sometimes, we don't communicate with God. The other way is also true: our prayers are not always answered, and the cruellest life changes can arrive without any warning. The gap between the rich and the poor is growing in most nations. In her recent blog, entitled "Occupy Hope", Mardi Tindal, the Moderator of the United Church, says that she sees the occupy movement as both a search for hope and a statement of hope, made by people who have come to believe that something is deeply wrong in the staggering inequality of our current society." So, how can we be Advent people when there is so much pain and brokenness in our lives and in the world?

In a time of despair, Isaiah declares hope not in what the people have done or what God might have done, but in who they are and who God is. "Yet, O Lord, you are our father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." Isaiah implores God to take responsibility for the clay, and reminds the people of Israel that they are the clay, after all, not the other way around. What does it mean that God is the potter and we are the clay?

Imagine a potter is molding her clay diligently, patiently and creatively. It is just amazing that the clay is being shaped into whatever she wants it to be. She uses her whole body to push the clay into the centre of the wheel, then she keeps the clay spinning on the wheel, smoothing and reshaping over and over again with water and her gentle hands. I really appreciate the image of the potter and the clay, not the potter and the pottery. Traditionally, Korean master potters smashed all of their imperfect vessels, but there is no such violence in the image of the potter and the clay. The clay is always in the process of becoming, constantly metamorphosing in the hands of the potter. There is no failure in the process of creating, because she hasn't finished yet. There is no separation, because the potter and her clay are becoming one.

We are the clay and God is the potter, after all. That gives us hope; our God hasn't finished with us yet; we can't be separated from God. And that gives us a challenge too; sometimes we need to let go of our own will, attachment and old patterns that no longer represent who we are or who we want to be, and allow ourselves to evolve into the people God is creating us to be. It doesn't matter how old we are, we can still be worked, be molded, and be created by God. That is an Advent message as we are waiting for the Christ child.

I think clay and a baby are similar; they both are gentle; they are both receptive and dependent; and they are full of potential and hope. We wait and celebrate the coming of Christ, who came as a baby, and who was entirely receptive to God's will as an adult. Before Jesus was arrested, he prayed "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." Jesus, who did such amazing things, healing, reconciling and making all things new, at the end, affirmed that he was just the clay of his potter, Abba.

So, my friends in Christ, in this time of waiting, let us prepare for God to create something new in our lives and in our world, let us prepare our inner selves, our hearts, for the Christ child to be born within us anew.