

There's a passage in the first book in the Narnia series, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* when the children are startled to discover that Aslan is a lion. It goes like this:

"Is he -- quite safe?" Susan asks. "I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie, and no mistake," replies Mrs. Beaver, "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else silly." "Then he isn't safe?" Lucy asks. To which Mr. Beaver responds, "Safe? Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

The ambivalence of the Beavers and the children about Aslan; the sense that he is wonderful and good but hardly **safe**, is perhaps the essence of Advent.

In today's gospel, Jesus is talking to his disciples about the Parousia or Second Coming. This is a time of great joy when all that we hope for is revealed in Christ – when the whole of Creation finds its fulfilment in the Christ. But it is also a time of awe and perhaps some fearfulness – will we be found wanting when all things are judged and put in their proper place? Is the Christ **safe**?

Over the centuries there have been many who have predicted the exact day of the Christ's coming, but here Jesus reminds us that only the Creator, the fountain of fullness, knows when it will be. Rather than the Parousia being a date on God's calendar, it may be that the God who moves through all things bringing all things to their intended fruition will one day know that that point has been reached and then we will see the culmination of creation and redemption. But we won't know when that is.

Jesus says it'll be like the days before the great flood, when humanity was going about its normal business, unaware of the cataclysm that was ahead. Only Noah was aware. Only Noah was actively listening, actively mindful of God's mission.

In the day when Christ, the Son of Man, is fully revealed, two people working together will be separated – one will be taken and one left. This verse is one of those on which the theory of the Rapture is based. The Rapture is when, it is said, those who are true followers of Jesus will be swept up into heaven and those who are left on earth will be subject to terrible events for a thousand years. This theory became popular in the 1830s and is foundational theology for many of our evangelical friends. It has proved to be a very helpful image for preachers who want to scare their listeners into salvation.

You may remember a few years ago, it became the basis for a highly successful series, *Left Behind*, which were novels written by an Evangelical preacher imagining what it would be like after the Rapture for the people "left behind."

But there are other ways of understanding this verse. It uses two very ambiguous Greek verbs. Rather than there being one translation – one will be taken (up into heaven) and the other left (behind), there are several possibilities. For example, it could mean, one will be led off as a prisoner and the other forgiven, which is quite different.

In the story of Noah's ark, the ones who were left were the ones safe in the ark and the ones taken were swept away in the waters. So perhaps Jesus means that the one left is the one who is in some way more faithful. We don't know. Certainly these two verses do not necessarily mean that one day the faithful will be swept up into heaven, leaving the unfaithful behind.

There are plenty of more common and clear words that the gospeller could have chosen. Perhaps he chose these ambiguous words to reflect the uncertainty that Jesus is describing. Whether the Christ comes as a flood or as a thief, the one thing we can be certain about is that we won't know.

But we are not generally comfortable with not knowing. One of the worst times we experience is between the doctor saying there may be something seriously wrong, and waiting for the test results. Uncertainty makes us anxious. So it's not surprising that over the centuries people have put a lot of energy into trying to calculate the date of the end of the world, or mapping out exactly what each prophecy says so that we have a clear plan of how it will all end.

And yet Jesus says "no-one knows about that day or that hour, not even the angels in heaven." We don't know.

So how do we live in this don't know? Earlier this year some of us discussed how insights from Buddhism can help us better know Christianity.¹ As part of that conversation we watched a video in which a Korean Christian Buddhist, Chung Hyun Kyung, talked of the practice given to her by her Buddhist teacher of asking "Who am I?" and every time she got the same answer, "Don't know". Over and over again, "Whom am I? Don't know. Who am I? Don't know. Who am I? Don't know."

Within the profound not-knowing, Chung Hyun Kyung discovered a spaciousness and a peace. This is very different from most Protestant Christianity which wants everything to make logical sense and delights in systematic theology.

Advent calls us to live in the not-knowing. On the one hand it is a season of joy. We hear again the prophecies of the coming Savior-King, the Prince of Peace, the Great Deliverer and we look forward to the turning of the year and the coming of the light again. On the other hand it is a season of self-examination – are we ready to receive the Christ, whether he comes to us as a child or as a Sovereign?

Advent invites us to wonder and to awe. Not at the lights on the Christmas trees or on the streets but at the coming light of the world. Advent invites us to wake from sleep – to become conscious. The time honored way of becoming conscious is the same in Buddhism and in Christianity – to sit in the silence, in the place of not-knowing, and let it become spacious. To let go of the plans and the many needs of the day and go deep into the silence. Because when we find our feet in the not-knowing and can be at peace in the emptiness then we can face the uncertainty of the day with equanimity.

¹ Without Buddha I could not be a Christian, Paul Knitter

In a surprising way, our safety is in the uncertainty. The more we can allow ourselves to trust that the Christ is coming and that the reign of God is really here and now as well as not yet, the more we can relax into the uncertainty of the future. Listen again to the wisdom of Mr. and Mrs. Beaver:

"Is he -- quite safe?" Susan asks. "I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie, and no mistake," replies Mrs. Beaver, "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else silly." "Then he isn't safe?" Lucy asks. To which Mr. Beaver responds, "Safe? Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."