

Prodded to life: Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

by [James Alison](#) in the [November 27, 2007](#) issue

How is the Presence working on us? Once again the liturgy gives us three different prods into life. As the sound of portentous thunder begins to diminish, we are being trained to perceive a shape to the One who comes, a shape that is different from the one that our fantasies and our fears have constructed for us.

A hypnotist summons a temporary new conscious self into being by getting us to concentrate on something outside ourselves; he or she then works on the relationships that cause us to think and perceive as we do. In liturgy, the jostling together of the different voices from scripture enables us to continue a journey of rebirth. Our new self is quickened into existence as the Spirit awakens in us someone who we didn't know we were, but who turns out to be more ourselves.

The jostling and the puncturing continue apace. With the reading from Isaiah, we are gently let down from the portentousness of the vision of the Judge from Zion. The vision is being refocused. It is becoming clearer that the One who is to come will be human and have a history, which means that the One will be part of a certain fulfillment. The story started with Jesse; it was a tricky story, since of all Jesse's children it was the most improbable one, the youngest, the pretty-boy with the beautiful eyes, who was anointed. Any story fulfilling the story of Jesse is likely to be improbable.

Isaiah then gives us two visions not yet joined together. In the first we learn what the new anointed one will be like, what gifts he will have and how he will be someone run by Elsewhere—he will not be run by the criteria of groupthink, of lobbying groups; his criteria will give voice to the meek who have no voice and don't know how to use a voice. His words will become the criteria for everything, much to the dismay of the wicked. And yet even at this stage of Isaiah's imagination, there is also something harsh about the One, who will be striking the earth and killing the wicked.

How is that to be reconciled with the ushering in of peace? For we are promised that the One who is to come longs for peace and seeks to make it possible. The

extravagance of the peace to come is illustrated by the wolf lying down with the lamb, the lion eating straw like an ox, which was what happened to Nebuchadnezzar following Daniel's prophecy (Dan. 4:25-33) so that he could learn the sovereignty of Yahweh. The One who is to come longs for us to live in peace, yet how will that peacefulness be inaugurated? Surely that One will stand as a sign. What sort of sign will he be? Will his face be as hard as flint? If he is to be a vanguard of vengeance, how will he make peace? For vengeance multiplied never leads to peace, but only to more vengeance.

The Pauline passage works on us another way, reminding us that the One who came was the truth of God; he fulfilled the prophecies to the patriarchs and opened up the truth of all things beyond the confines of Israel. Our access to this truth, the sign that the One who is to come *has* come, is shown in our living out the first fruits by dwelling in harmony with one another. Beginning to be empowered to live in peace is the first fruits of the coming. From living in that peace comes hope in what is to come in the future, a sense of things opening out, of things being verified. The givenness of peace and of our access to truth come together.

Let us not fool ourselves. The gentleness of the One who is to come is hinted at, but we still have John the Baptist pointing to the fulfillment of his own work. He too is out of focus; he knows that only a change of heart and mind will enable people to begin to perceive the shape of the One who is to come. He also knows that between his preparation of people and the shape of the Presence to come there is an incommensurable distance. Yet even he can scarcely understand that his rite of public penance and purification will also be the rite of ordination of the great High Priest who is to come, and thereafter of all of us who are to have access to the Holy of Holies because of his sacrifice.

Why his hostility to the Pharisees and Sadducees who come for baptism? He knows how dangerous apparent goodness is, and the sense of entitlement that comes with it. He was aware of how dangerous to such goodness is the One who is to come, but like Isaiah he seems unable to grasp that the One who is coming will be the bearer of all that dangerousness—not because there is violence in him, but because he'll be in the midst of the fear and resentment of those around him.

We have not yet undergone the extraordinary shift in perception and imagination that comes upon us when we understand that in him there is no violence at all, no vengeance, no desire for retribution, only a longing for us to be fully alive. All our fears, our desires for revenge and the stumbling blocks that we so easily project

onto God are ours alone and can be undone, let go and forgiven by the One who is coming.