

Stretched hearts

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

With each Sunday of Advent, it is as though the Spirit brings us deeper into the Presence by bringing us closer to having our feet on the ground, closer to the present, and closer to our own hearts. The divine Heart Surgeon is reconfiguring our desires so that we can inhabit both the Presence and the present. How else can we be made alive?

This means learning how to long, how to hope and how to be vulnerable to failure. There is no coming without traveling this route. If we cannot be taken to the end of ourselves, stretched beyond our capacity to imagine a salvation, and have our longing forged against the hard anvil of apparent impossibility, then we are still wanting something that is a continuation of our selves, and not the Other who is coming in.

There is scarcely a more poignant communication in the New Testament than John's message from prison: "Art Thou the One who is to come, or wait we for another?" Here is a heart stretched toward a fulfillment that is not of his making, and in the face of which he is vulnerable to a sense of shame, loss and futility. Given what he is undergoing, how can he be sure that he has been pointing in the direction of God's breaking in? Will this One vindicate him against the enemy who holds him in a dungeon? Even he runs the risk of being scandalized by Jesus.

The presence of the One who is coming in would be easier to talk about if its time was not yet at hand. Now it is coming in, however, and as it comes, the presence is not what John imagined, and it becomes even more difficult to identify as it draws closer. Shouldn't the criteria be clearer? Shouldn't it be more obvious that the One who comes will recompense his faithful ones and wreak vengeance on evildoers?

Our Lord replies in two ways. First he replies to John. He knows that it would be unfair to give John a personal guarantee, to say, "I really am who you thought—trust me," for that would merely leave John agonizing over his own ability to trust another human. So Jesus points toward something objective, the signs of the One coming in. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk and so on—the whole Isaiah package.

The God who hides himself—El Mistater—does not point to himself, but allows his works to be rejoiced in (Isa. 45:15). The signs being given are those of the Creator breaking in to fulfill his creation, which is what the promised redemption is all about. John's heart can rest on this knowledge, for to one whose heart is attuned to One who has no part in the order of existing things, a sign of God's work is the greatest refreshment that can be given: it allows the heart to rest on the giver.

Our Lord even recognizes for John that, at the end of being stretched toward the Other who is coming, there is the risk of scandal, the risk that we will interpret the One according to our own desire, make him the resolution of our needs, and so not recognize the real One who comes. If we are not scandalized, however, we are set free, no longer needing to fear the social other that surrounds us, but instead confident that we're held in the regard of a power that is more solid than any form of group bonding, cultural togetherness or interpersonal prestige.

Here, at the very edge of the stretched fulfillment, it is as if Jesus knows that by asking people to let go of the notion of a divine retribution, he leaves them with two options—to trust in the goodness of the One coming in or be locked in scandal at the collapse of partisan goodness and the constant need to build it up again. This latter possibility is the arrival of a new sort of wrath—a very powerful wrath, but one that is not divine but purely human.

Our Lord then turns to those he was teaching and comments on John: when the crowds went out to the desert to be baptized, was it just a celebrity show, a collective display of mourning? This week we have an ascetic celebrity, next week we'll have a Hollywood starlet? Was this all there was to John? No indeed! He was part of the solidity of God's self-manifestation—nothing futile about him. The crowd was right to pick up that there was something of God here. Just as John was stretched, even in his imprisonment, so he was sent to stretch others' hearts and imaginations so that they might find themselves able to receive the One coming in.

Yet—and here Jesus is adamant—there is a difference not only in degree but in kind between the imagination of John and the imagination of those who find themselves ushered into the Presence: the one undergoing the sacrifice has taken human violence inside himself, and there is no violence coming out.

James illustrates this new stretching of the heart inside the sign of the kingdom: be patient, strengthen your hearts, do not grumble. It is easier for us than for the

prophets, if only we would remember this, because we have seen what John did not live to see: the full purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. The One coming in wants to show us that there is no violence in him.

Did I say that makes it easier? What is it like to be stretched out in a wrathful world in expectation of the arrival of an incommensurable power who is not wrathful?