

Advent Oratorio: Preface

Tom Wright

Advent is more complicated than Easter. When Paul Spicer approached me about writing a follow-up to our 'Easter Oratorio', suggesting we take Advent as the theme, it seemed to me both completely appropriate and freshly challenging.

Easter is about one single, massive moment: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. We have four different accounts of that moment and its immediate aftermath, and for the Oratorio we took John's version as having the most obvious and varied 'human interest', in the meetings of the risen Jesus with several of his followers. Advent isn't like that. It's about two different historical moments which, though they're umbilically joined, do not immediately reveal how they fit together.

The great, massive Advent moment is still to come in the future, and this provides the over-arching structure of the present Oratorio. Both Old and New Testaments promise that one day the God who created the world will flood it with his glory, transforming it so that it thrills and throbs with his love, justice and peace. That is the promise, from both Testaments, that forms the outer structure of the present work. In the Old Testament, this is seen in well-known Psalms such as 96 and 98, and in particular the great Messianic vision of Isaiah 11, where the whole creation is restored in peace under the rule of the 'little child'. In the New Testament, it encompasses passages such as Acts 1, Philippians 3, and of course Revelation, which speak of the return of Jesus himself (the 'second coming') to put all things to rights.

Part of the difficulty of grasping all this, in our day, is the frustrating fact that a good deal of Western Christianity has almost entirely forgotten this promise. Many people assume without question that the final Christian hope is to leave this wicked world of space, time and matter and to go off, as disembodied souls, into 'heaven'. That is fine as a statement of what happens to God's people immediately after they die, but it won't do as an account of the great scriptural promises of new creation. There is a further, fuller hope, for a new world in which we shall have new bodies and new tasks to perform, celebrating and implementing God's victory over evil, injustice and death itself. The outer framing of this Oratorio tries to capture and celebrate this fuller hope.

The other 'moment', umbilically joined to this final one, is of course the *first* 'coming' of Jesus. In the four gospels, this is not primarily concerned with Jesus' birth, important though that is, but with his appearance at the time of John's baptism, and the launch of his public ministry in which he announces that God is at last becoming King. This combination of themes makes our own liturgical keeping of Advent very complex: are we preparing for Christmas, for the Coming of Jesus through John's Baptism, or for the Second Coming? The answer, liturgically, often seems to be 'all three', but I suspect that many ordinary worshippers are just confused. In this Oratorio, we are not concerned with Christmas, but with the other two 'comings'. We attempt to show,

poetically and musically, how the coming of Jesus at the start of his public ministry ‘nests’ within the larger picture of the final sorting-out of all things (also known as ‘the last judgment’).

Jesus’ Kingdom-announcement (‘What would it look like if God was running the show? Watch and listen and you’ll find out!’) is the *anticipation*, close up and personal in Jesus’ deeds and words, of the final promise in the Psalms and Isaiah. So the role of John the Baptist, whose brief story forms the inner core of the Oratorio, is to get people ready for *this* ‘coming’. His ministry of baptism picks up the Old Testament promises of God’s fresh cleansing of his people. His preaching and teaching warn people to get ready for the Coming One who will sweep through God’s world and God’s people like a forest fire. And part of that ‘getting ready’ is the challenge to live already, in the present time, by the rule of the justice that is coming. Hence John’s simple, direct challenge to his hearers.

The close link between first and second ‘comings’ of Jesus then becomes clear. Jesus is baptized by John. The Spirit descends, anointing Jesus afresh for his public ministry. The voice of God himself is heard, announcing him as his beloved Son. He is the one who will bring God’s sovereign, saving rule ‘on earth as in heaven’. The double Advent theme thus dovetails perfectly together. The first coming is not only the preparation for the second one; it forms a kind of template for it. Learning to live appropriately between the two ‘comings’, under the rescuing rule of Jesus and in the power of his Spirit, is what it means to be Christian.

Music – that mysterious world in which we discover new dimensions of time itself – is one of the gifts which enables us to make this strange double story our own. It is a privilege once again to be teamed up with Paul Spicer to bring faith and art together in creative fusion. And it is a joy to think of this work being performed in Lichfield Cathedral, which has for so long been for so many a sign and a means of God’s coming kingdom.

+Tom Wright
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Advent Oratorio

Translation and libretto by Tom Wright for a setting by Paul Spicer

(Final draft of text, some alterations made in composition)

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1. Opening Chorus

When the deaf hear the song of the new-born swan
and the lame go dancing on gold;
When the pauper raises his cheerful glass,
And the blind exclaim at the bright green grass,
And the hills bow down for the Lamb to pass,
Then the tale will at last be told.

It's a tale of a world put right at last,
it's the news of justice done;
It's the story the dead are eager to learn,
it's the song of the hedgerow, the stream and the fern,
it's the whisper of a long-lost Lord's return,
Of heaven and earth made one.

When the axe is laid to the root of the tree
(As the Baptist saw long ago);
When the greedy are blamed, and the violent tamed,
and the liars are named and the lustful ashamed,
and the rights of the poor are at last proclaimed,
Then the River of Life will flow.

And the Tree will grow its healing leaves,
and the Advent bell will ring;
And the stars will sparkle their glad applause,
and the seas will lend their voice to the cause,
while the angels unlock the ancient doors,
To welcome the coming King.

2. Prophet with Chorus: The Coming of the King (Isaiah 11/Psalm 96)

Prophet

A branch will grow from Jesse's root
Inspired with Yahweh's breath;
Spirit of wisdom, counsel, might,
Blow through the world to set things right
And conquer fear and death!

Chorus

A new song for Yahweh! He's coming to rule!
Let all creation erupt with his praise;
The sneers of injustice, the taunt of the fool
Fall silent when faced with his questioning gaze.

Prophet

The wolf shall lie beside the lamb
The lion shall eat hay;
The child shall play beside the snake
The earth will yawn, and stretch, and wake
To greet Messiah's day.

Chorus

He's coming to reign! He's coming as king!
Let all the nations be glad and rejoice.
The sea and the field and the forest shall sing
At the justice and mercy and truth of his voice!

3. Evangelist: (Luke 3.1–3)

It was the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar as Emperor;
Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea;
Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis,
and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene;
and Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests.
Then it was that the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.
He went through all the region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

4. Aria: It was to him

It was to him that they came:
To the wild-eyed man with the unkempt beard
Eating wild honey. They were tired
Of the smooth priests, the tame tetrarchs,
The bullying governor and
Caesar sneering from the tribute penny.
They wanted news
Of a Coming, a Kingdom, a wild
Untameable future, full of forgiveness
And fresh beginnings. It was to him
That they came: to the cry of promise,
The word that echoed through the silent centuries,

The voice in the wilderness.

5. Prophet and Chorus: I will sprinkle clean water (Ezekiel 36)

Prophet

Thus says Yahweh:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you,
And you shall be clean;
A new heart I will give you
And a new Spirit I will put within you;
And you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Chorus

Come, Lord, and cleanse us from our sin;
Your new, glad work in us begin.
Remove our idols from our sight;
Let us in you alone delight.

Prepare us for your coming reign
By washing us from every stain;
Make known to us your holy Name;
Let us no more turn back to shame.

Call us to you from every land,
And guide us with your powerful hand;
Show us the path that we must tread,
Let us by you with joy be led.

Implant your Spirit in our heart,
That, with your Breath, new life may start;
Take from our flesh the heart of stone,
Let us rejoice in you alone.

For your own sake your love display,
That we may worship and obey;
Rebuild the wild and desert place;
Let us acclaim your sovereign grace.

6. FIRST HYMN: HARK A HERALD VOICE

Hark! A herald voice is calling:
'Christ is nigh,' it seems to say;
'Cast away the dreams of darkness,
O ye children of the day!'

Startled by the solemn warning,
Let the earth-bound soul arise;
Christ, her Sun, all sloth dispelling,
Shines upon the morning skies.

Lo! The Lamb, so long expected,
Comes with pardon down from heaven;
Let us haste, with tears of sorrow,
One and all to be forgiven.

That when next he comes in glory,
Wrapping all the earth in fear,
He may then as our defender
On the clouds of heaven appear.

Honour, glory, virtue, merit
To the Father and the Son,
With the co-eternal Spirit
While unending ages run. Amen.

7. Evangelist and Prophet: (Luke 3.7–9)

Evangelist

When John saw the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, he said to them:

Prophet

‘You brood of vipers! Who told you to escape from God’s coming anger? You’d better prove your repentance by bearing the right fruit! Don’t start saying to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father”; let me tell you, God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones! The axe is already standing by the roots of the tree – so every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.’

8. Chorus: The fire in the forest

The fire in the forest
The axe at the root
The judgment is coming
The snakes are in panic
The oak trees are falling
The judgment is coming
The vipers are fleeing
The branches are crashing
The judgment is coming
So, Abraham’s children,
Escape through the water
The wild Advent water

The judgment is coming
Escape while you can!

9. Aria: The stone the builders set aside

The stone the builders set aside
Now crowns the highest wall;
The stone that smashed the statue's feet
Has made the idol fall.
The stone that lay by Jordan's stream
Aroused by prophet wild
Springs to its feet in glad surprise
As Abraham's new-born child.

A hard-won mercy still shall come
Though judgment be severe;
New life, new love, new loyalty
From Abraham shall appear.
The Coming One shall call a tribe
Of twelve unlikely friends;
Through them the promise shall come true
And God achieve his ends.

10: Boys' Voices: From the Lips of Little Children

From the lips of little children
Perfect praise our God will bring:
Sing and cheer and shout Hosanna!
Alleluias to our King!
If the little ones fall silent
Rocks and stones will start to sing.

From the stones by Jordan river
New disciples God will bring:
Abraham's children, judged and ransomed,
Rise renewed to serve our King.
When the tree to earth has fallen,
From the stump new shoots will spring.

Abraham shall greet his children
From the nations God will bring;
Streaming in from earth's far corners
To exalt the world's true King.
Living stones, to build his Temple,
Shall with joy his praises sing.

11. Evangelist, Prophet and Chorus (Luke 3.10–14)

Evangelist

And the crowds asked John,

Chorus

What should we do?

Evangelist

John said in reply,

Prophet

‘Anyone who has two cloaks should give one to someone without one. And anyone with plenty of food should do the same.’

Evangelist

Some toll-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked,

Chorus

‘Teacher, what should we do?’

Evangelist

John said in reply,

Prophet

‘Don’t collect more than what is appointed.’

Evangelist

Some soldiers, too, asked John,

Chorus

‘What about us? What should we do?’

Evangelist

And he said to them,

Prophet

‘No extortion, and no blackmail. Be content with your wages.’

12. Aria: While we await the dawn

Justice will dawn, in person. While we wait
We must awaken justice in our midst:
Not high, imagined, general abstract dreams
Of worlds beyond our reach; but coats and food
And honest money. In a dangerous world
God’s order is a signpost to the dawn;
But those who wield that order must themselves
Be subject to God’s wise restraining hand.

13. SECOND HYMN: THY KINGDOM COME!

Thy kingdom come! On bended knee
The passing ages pray;
And faithful souls have yearned to see

On earth that kingdom's day.

But the slow watches of the night
Not less to God belong;
And for the everlasting right
The silent stars are strong.

And lo! Already on the hills
The flags of dawn appear;
Gird up your loins, ye prophet souls,
Proclaim the day is near.

The day in whose clear, shining light
All wrong shall stand revealed;
When justice shall be throned with might
And every hurt be healed.

When knowledge, hand in hand with peace
Shall walk the earth abroad;
The day of perfect righteousness
The promised day of God.

14. Evangelist and Prophet: (Luke 3.15–17)

Evangelist

All the people were on tiptoe with excitement,
wondering whether John might be the Messiah.
But John said to them all,

Prophet

'I am baptizing you with water. But someone is coming who is stronger than I am, and I don't deserve to untie his sandal-strap. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He will have his winnowing-fork to hand, ready to sort out the mess on his threshing floor and gather the corn into his barn. Any rubbish he will burn with a fire that will never go out.'

15. Aria: The corn is ripe at last

The corn is ripe at last. The long, slow wait
Through rainy spring and summer heat is done;
Now comes the harvest. And the flame. The Stronger One,
With fork in hand, with Spirit and with fire
Will gather in the corn, and burn the chaff.

16. Evangelist and VOICE OF GOD: (Luke 3.21–22)

Evangelist

So it happened that, as all the people were being baptized, Jesus too was baptized, and was praying. The heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in a bodily form, like a dove. There came a voice from heaven:

Voice of God

You are my son, my dear son! You have made me glad!

17. Aria: What speech is this

What speech is this
That breathes across the worlds
A word of love?
What gentle thunder, mighty whisper
Telling the Son the Father's pleasure?
What royal words are these
That call within the mystery
And send him forth as King?

18. Chorale: The prophet Samuel

The prophet Samuel, long ago
Anointed Jesse's son as king;
He came to Israel with joy
God's victory to announce and bring.
Prophetic call, prophetic word
Established him as Israel's lord.

Zadok, the priest of Aaron's line,
With holy oil made Solomon king.
He came to Israel with joy
God's wisdom and God's rule to bring.
The priestly sign, the priestly call
Made Solomon the lord of all.

So John the Baptist, prophet, priest
Announces God's anointed king,
Who comes to Israel with joy
God's kingdom and God's peace to bring.
The water, word, descending Dove
Proclaim him as the Lord of love.

19. THIRD HYMN: O COME, O COME EMMANUEL

O Come, O come Emmanuel
Redeem thy captive Israel

That into exile drear is gone
Far from the face of God's dear son.
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

O come, thou Root of Jesse! draw
The quarry from the lion's claw;
From those dread caverns of the grave,
From nether hell, thy people save.

O come, thou Lord of David's Key!
The royal door fling wide and free;
Safeguard for us the heavenward road,
And bar the way to death's abode.

O come, O come, thou Dayspring bright!
Pour on our souls thy healing light;
Dispel the long night's lingering gloom,
And pierce the shadows of the tomb.

O come, Desire of nations! show
Thy kingly reign on earth below;
Thou Corner-stone, uniting all,
Restore the ruin of our fall.
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

20. Evangelist and Angels (Acts 1.10–11)

Evangelist

After Jesus had died and been raised, he went with his disciples to the Mount of Olives. While he was talking with them, he was taken from them into heaven. Suddenly two men in white robes stood beside the Apostles, and said,

Angels

Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you saw him go into heaven.

21. Chorus: Heaven's Colony (Philippians 3.20f.)

We are heaven's colony
Awaiting heaven's king
He'll come as Saviour, Lord and Judge
His sovereign rule to bring.
Our shameful state he will transform
To glory like his own;

His kingdom he will set on earth
With power from his throne.

22. Prophet (1 Corinthians 15; Romans 8)

Then comes the End, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father; for he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet, so that God may be all in all. For the whole creation will be set free from its bondage to decay, to share the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

23. Chorus/new hymn (Psalm 72)

O Lord, give justice to the King!
Enable him to judge the right;
Let him decide with equity
Let him defend the poor with might.

Send to us now, from highest hills,
The rivers of abundant peace;
May justice flow through all the land
Confront oppression; let it cease!

From sea to sea his reign shall spread
And distant kings their gifts shall bring;
His enemies shall lick the dust
The needy poor his praise shall sing.

Praise to the Lord, to Israel's God!
For only he can do these things;
His glory now shall flood the world
And all adore the King of Kings.

24. Aria: (Isaiah 6/11)

The smoke-filled temple heard the six-winged song
Proclaiming to the terrified Isaiah
That Yahweh's glory fills the vast wide world.
The prophet then discerned the Advent truth
That peace would fill the hearts of all God's creatures
Under the Spirit-breathed, anointed king.
Come, Jesus, come: as waters fill the sea
So overflow your world at last with love.

25. Boys' Voices: A Little Child Shall Lead Them

Who will lead the dance

When the wolf and lamb shall play?
Who will lead the dance
When the lion shall eat hay?
A little child, a little child,
A little child shall lead them.

Who will lead the way
When the snake no longer bites?
Who will lead the way
When the bear no longer fights?
A little child, a little child,
A little child shall lead them.

Who will lead them home
When God's knowledge fills the earth?
Who will lead them home
When His power brings hope to birth?
A little child, a little child,
A little child shall lead them.

26. Prophet (Hebrews 9.27f.)

Just as it is laid down that humans have to die once, and after that comes judgment, so the Messiah, having been offered once for all to take away sins, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly awaiting him.

27. Chorus: Once Again

Once again
The heavens will open
Once again
The Messiah will appear
Once again
The Voice will be proclaim him King
Once again

This time
All will acclaim him
This time
Every knee shall bow
This time
He will judge the nations
This time

For now
We pray for the Spirit

For now
We live by his rule
For now
We work for his justice
For now

28. Chorus with solos: the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21/22)

Prophet

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth
For the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared
And the sea was no more.
And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem
Coming down from heaven from God,
Prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.
And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying,

Chorus

Behold! God is living with humans!
He will dwell with them;
They will be his people, and God himself will be with them.
He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Prophet

And the one who sat on the throne said,

Voice of God

Behold! I am making all things new!

Prophet

And he said to me,

Jesus

Behold! I am coming soon!
My reward is with me, to give to everyone
According to what they have done.
I am Alpha and Omega
The first and the last
The beginning and the end.

Evangelist/Solos/Chorus

The Spirit and the Bride say,
'Come'
And let everyone who hears say,
'Come'
And let everyone who is thirsty say

‘Come’

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!

29. FINAL HYMN AND PSALM: LO HE COMES WITH CLOUDS DESCENDING

(Psalm 98)

Lo, he comes, with clouds descending
Once for favoured sinners slain;
Thousand thousand saints attending
Swell the triumph of his train;
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
God appears, on earth to reign.

O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvellous things;
his right hand and his holy arm have gained him the victory.

The Lord has made known his victory;
He has revealed his vindication in the sight of all the nations.

He has remembered his mercy and faithfulness to the house of Israel;
All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

Every eye shall now behold him,
Robed in dreadful majesty:
Those who set at nought, and sold him,
Pierced and nailed him to the Tree,
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing
Shall the true Messiah see.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!
Sing, rejoice and give thanks.

Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre;
With the lyre and the sound of melody.

With trumpets and the sound of the horn;
Make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King!

Those dear tokens of his passion
Still his dazzling body bears:
Cause of endless exultation
To his ransomed worshippers.
With what rapture, with what rapture, with what rapture
Gaze we on those glorious scars.

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
The world, and all who dwell in it.

Let the floods clap their hands;
Let the hills sing together for joy before the Lord!

For he is coming, he is coming to judge the earth;
He will judge the world with justice, and the peoples with equity.

Yea, Amen! Let all adore thee
High on thine eternal throne;
Saviour, take the power and glory,
Claim the kingdom for thine own:
O come quickly! O come quickly! O come quickly!
Alleluia! Come, Lord, come!

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son; and to the Holy Spirit;
As it was in the beginning; is now and ever shall be;
World without end; Amen.