Seeing the Light with New Eyes: a Meditation for Advent

In the Christian calendar, Advent is the season of waiting: we wait as if we did not yet know the Christ-child will come. We wait in darkness, not just the darkness of December, but more importantly, the darkness of unknowing, uncertainty, the darkness in which hope is possible, but also extinguishable.

It's significant that the church calendar even includes Advent. Why, after all, not just go straight to Christmas? Secular society effectively already does just that, with its decorations and shopping starting in November and with so-called 'Advent calendars' being no more than a month of little gifts: a perfume or whiskey sample every day, to tantalise and satisfy until the over-indulgence of the main ConsumerFest. Advent calendars were never meant to be about gratification. Traditionally, they were simple cardboard calendars of one month, with something like Bible verses behind each door. They were meant to teach children the faith and deepen devotion to God in faith, hope and charity, not to gratify material desires. In fact, traditionally, Advent was a season of fasting, fasting being the appropriate preparation for feasting. Above all, perhaps, Advent was meant to teach Christians what it is to hope: while still in darkness, to hope that the light will yet dawn.

I learnt something about Advent before it began this year, when we went to Spain in late November. We went, not for the sun, the beaches, or the nightlife, but for the art galleries and architecture—just as well, since Storm Claudia blew through, hiding the sun and making any beach activity as miserable as it would be in the UK in late November. The galleries and architecture could not disappoint, though, even when the exteriors of the buildings were viewed through a curtain of chilly drizzle.

Of the four cities we visited, the cathedrals in three (Sevilla, Córdoba and Granada) were built on the sites where mosques had once stood, mosques which in turn may have been constructed over the ruins of Visigothic churches. One sees the remnants of the mosques to a greater or lesser extent in all these cathedrals, but nowhere more clearly than in Córdoba and it was in Córdoba that I saw the Gothic architecture I have taught and written about, which I see on a daily basis in the three churches in my home parish, in a startlingly new light, a light which also sheds light on Advent, the season of waiting and darkness.

Whatever structure may have preceded the Córdoba mosque, its history is lost, neither written records nor archaeological evidence giving an clear indication. The earliest structure of which we have hard evidence is the first mosque, constructed in 785, after the Moorish conquest of Andalucía, and expanded several times in later centuries. After the reconquest of Córdoba by the Christians, it was converted into a cathedral, beginning in 1236 but evolving over centuries, as many medieval churches have done.

What makes Córdoba strikingly different from Sevilla or Granada is the extent of the Moorish remains still evident within the cathedral. The original mosque had a roughly square floor plan, something very rare in Christian architecture, with an open courtyard

for the worshippers' ablutions, an interior prayer hall and a minaret. The hall was a large space, with a low wooden roof supported by 'a forest of columns'.[1] Initially few changes were made to the mosque, other than to insert numerous small chapels and later, to convert the minaret into a bell tower. It was not until several centuries later, beginning in 1523, that a nave and transept were built into the mosque structure, with a high altar lit from above, since there are no windows.

What struck me so vividly was that once you are away from the high altar and its surrounds, you return to a huge, low-ceilinged, rather dark space, peppered with various dimly-lit small altars lavishly decorated with paintings and sculptures. The pillars are everywhere, supporting a roof which seems to press down rather than rise up.

The longer I walked around it, the more strange it seemed, despite all the paintings and statues of familiar saints or Biblical scenes in the small chapels. In a Gothic cathedral, you never lose sight of the high altar for long: it acts as the focus of the entire building, whether that building is cruciform, oblong or round. In Córdoba, however, the high altar and 'nave' seem like an afterthought, as indeed they are: insertions into a building whose primary purpose was praying and listening to sermons, not any liturgical act like the Eucharist. The maze of columns diffuses any visual focus there might have been.

Likewise, the low roof and lack of windows make the space dim and shadowy, which might be conducive to quiet prayer, but creates a very different atmosphere from that of Gothic churches, with their soaring arches, high vaulted roofs and stained glass replacing much of the stone between the pillars. The only parts of Christian worship spaces I've been that resembled the large area of Córdoba cathedral are crypts—which tend to be dark because they are essentially basements.

However stunning Córdoba is, it ultimately did not 'read' to me like a Christian place of worship, at least not when you got away from the immediate vicinity of the high altar. That intuition might seem like a narrow-minded vote for the Gothic, but I've been in plenty of Romanesque, Neo-Classical and Baroque churches and they did not leave me with the sense of being out of place, the way I did in Córdoba cathedral.

What could explain the sense of displacement? One answer is that Córdoba has never actually ceased to be a mosque, even though it is no longer used as one. The interior space was not designed to have a visual focus, as an altar provides, and although one was later slotted in, it looks all too much like what it is: an afterthought. The 'forest' of columns, like a forest of trees, does not suggest any clear path: it is not designed for processions, such as those that provide the solemn marker of the beginning of worship in a Christian church. Perhaps even more importantly, the lack of a 'path' means the sacred space does not suggest pilgrimage, the way a Gothic church does.

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[1] Barrucand, Marianne and Achim Bednorz. *Moorish architecture in Andalusia.* Taschen, 1992, p. 58.

Think about this for a moment: often in such churches, the main entry opens onto an area with a font. The font does not symbolise the beginning of Christian life: it *is* where every Christian's life begins. As the baptised pass by the font, we are reminded of the beginning of our own lives in Christ, when we were marked with the sign of the cross, made his own forever and incorporated into the life of the Holy Trinity. The journey continues into the nave, which we are so used to calling the nave that we perhaps forget it comes from the Latin word for 'ship'. If we look upwards, the roof over the nave generally resembles the bottom of a wooden boat: the nave, where we worship, is like a boat carrying us toward God, day by day, week by week. The journey's destination is the altar, where we meet the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of the altar. In the eucharistic prayer, the celebrant addresses the Father, recalls the life and work of the Son, and calls upon the Holy Spirit to bless the gifts that they may become for us truly Christ's body and blood, broken and poured out for us. The eucharistic prayer reminds the gathered congregation that it is here, around the altar, that we find the centre and fullness of our lives as Christians; here, where we join with the angels and the archangels and the glorious company of heaven as we sing 'Holy, holy, holy'. Our journey through the church, from the door, past the font, through the nave and to the altar, is a miniature of our lives, a journey through this life to the next.

The standard Gothic architecture many of us see day in and day out was designed to take us on that pilgrimage, but it was inspired by an even grander vision. The first Gothic church, so the standard history goes, was what is now the church of Saint Denis, in one of the outlying suburbs of Paris. It was the vision of a man who was arguably almost a fanatic. Suger was not an architect, not a mason, not any kind of artist. He was just an abbot who had a vision of a structure that would embody the theology of the most influential Christian theologian you've probably never heard of: Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, or Denys (as he's generally called) . One of the significant pillars of Denys' theology was the notion of the flow of divine light and it was this idea that inspired Suger, driving him to raise the funds for a new abbey church and to communicate his theological vision of light through the unlikely media of stone and mortar. The church he built was designed to maximise the flow of light, light which symbolised the presence of God, and this became the theological principle that, more than any other, inspired all later Gothic architecture.

As Gothic architecture developed, it pushed roofs and vaults up higher, reduced the bulk of columns, and opened spaces in the walls to allow for stained glass windows that flooded the interior spaces with jewel-toned light. To accomplish what would have seemed structurally impossible, medieval masons devised a variety of solutions, from new forms of vaulting to external supports (flying buttresses). The Gothic church was a model of technological advance in the service of theology, liturgy, and beauty.

To walk into a Gothic structure, such as my own parish church, is to be taken on a pilgrimage from the font, through the nave, to the high altar, reflecting the Christian's journey from baptism, though earthly life to heaven. It is also to live, for a few moments,

in a space of soaring ceilings and vast windows, where the eye is directed upwards and the body is bathed in light. To stand in a Gothic church is to glimpse from afar something analogous to the divine light which will illuminate heaven, where there is no sun or moon (Rev 21.23), and to be inspired to look upwards, the heart rising with the eyes.

The difference between such a space and Córdoba cathedral is stark and it was by walking around Córdoba that I saw my parish church in a new light. In Advent we count the days until we celebrate the coming of the Word made flesh for us. In the dark of winter (at least in the Northern hemisphere) we are reminded that the Light bestowed by the Father of Lights (Jas 1.17) and Jesus, the Light of the World (John 8.12), comes into the world not only via the great lights of creation, the sun, the moon and the stars, but from the spiritual light communicated through grace: the light of holiness, peace, justice, goodness and beauty. That is why Jesus says to his followers '*You* are the light of the world' (Mt 5.14): we who walk in the light are to be bearers of light.

We might remind ourselves of this in Advent: we may be privileged to worship in light-flooded spaces, surrounded by beauty, but the the world in which we live is full of darkness, even at the height of summer. The war-mongers, famine-creators, torturers, people-traffickers and all the rest do not cease to ply their deathly trades because Christmas is approaching; they will not pause on Christmas day. The light for which Christians wait is not the longer days of summer, but the light that comes to the 'sad and lowly plains', 'o'er all the weary world', in the words of the American Christmas carol, 'It came upon the midnight clear'. That light came into the world at the first Christmas and no darkness can overcome it. Yet we all have our part to do: as we live in light, so we must walk in the light (1 John 1:7; cp. Matthew 5:16, Romans 13:12, Ephesians 5:8-9). Advent is the season, of waiting, but also of spiritual discipline, of awareness that the world we now inhabit is far from manifesting the light of God. Pray for light this Advent: light for the world and light for your own soul. Pray above all that you and I and all Christians may be bearers of light to this world, passing on to others what we have been graced to receive.

'In your light, we see light' (Ps 36.9)