

Advent Reflection for the First Sunday in Advent (1.12.19)

'O Radix Jesse'

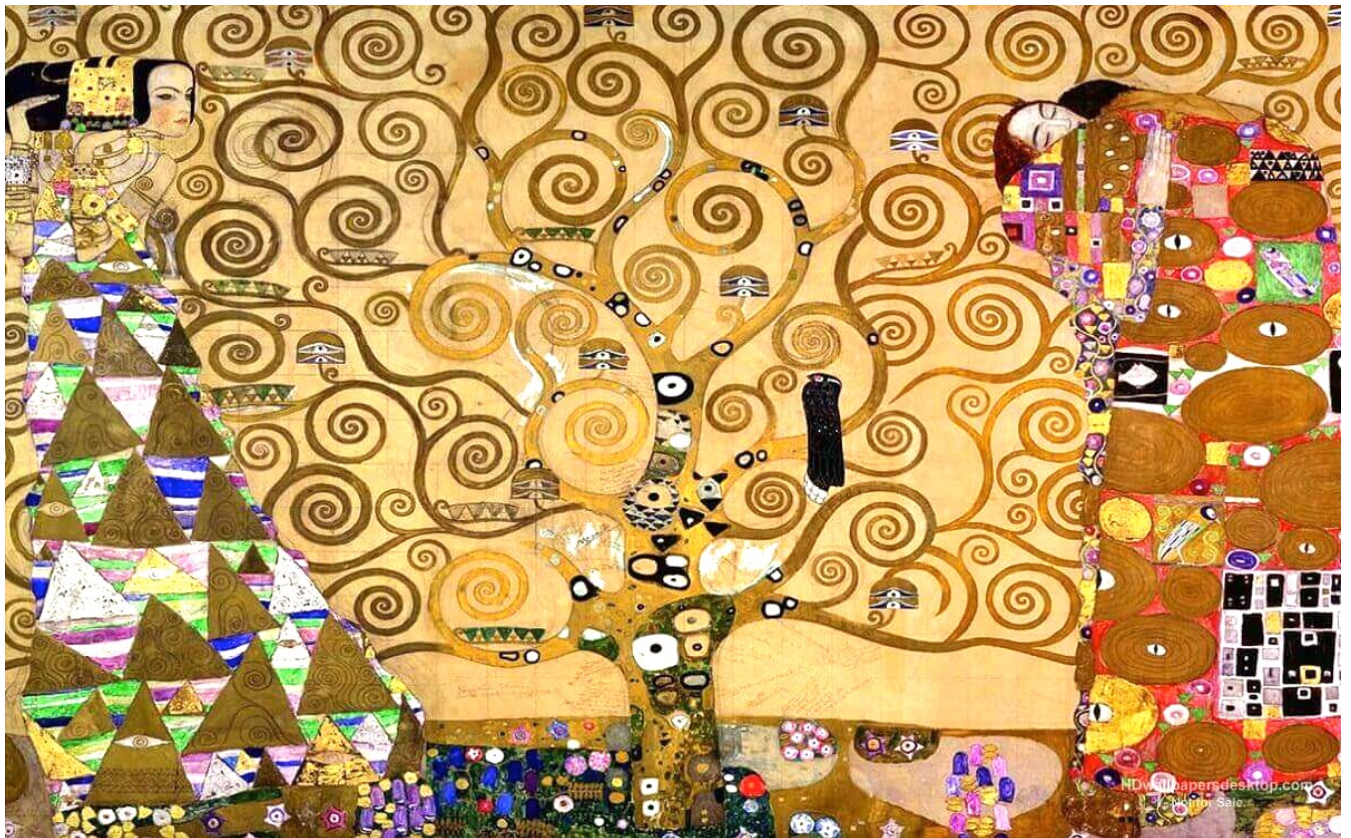
Isaiah 11:1-9

Ephesians 1:3-14

The third antiphon is 'O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse):

*O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples;
before you kings will shut their mouths,
to you the nations will make their prayer:
Come and deliver us, and delay no longer..*

Today, our chosen image is the painting, *Tree of Life* by Gustav Klimt, 1905.



Reflection by Karen McClain Kiefer:

The first thing I notice in this famous Gustav Klimt painting, *Tree of Life*, is the gold. . . and then the busyness. It is a veritable feast for the eyes – almost to the point of overwhelm. This painting is from Klimt's Golden Period late in his career, in which he painted other well-known works like *The Kiss* and *Woman in Gold*. *Tree of Life* is a study for a series of three mosaics in a frieze for his 1905-1911 commissioned work at the Palais Stoclet in Brussels.

Because of the bold colours and profusion of images of all sorts, Klimt's painting may seem questionably suited for the liturgical season of Advent with its summons to slow down and its invitation to contemplation. When I consider an image of the root of Jesse, I'm more inclined toward the ease and comfort of some soft watercolour piece with a little green leafy sprig sprouting from a stump in a peaceful grassy setting...

But instead, we have this image, a beautiful one. While it may seem ostentatious, incompatible with the quieting that Advent entreats, possibly even pandering to the glitz of Christmas consumerism and chaos to which Advent stands in stark contrast, I find it helpful in the context of an Advent reflection to remember the richness of the extreme gift that Advent anticipates. We just heard in the reading from the Letter to the Ephesians that 'In him we have redemption . . . according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us' (Eph 1:7-8). So perhaps we are justified to revel a bit.

Once the eye settles in, the painting offers many gifts. There is a horizontal, temporal sense of anticipation and fulfilment that this painting suggests; and a vertical sense of connected worlds which the Tree of Life spans, which also suggest ancestry or inheritance. The tree is prominent, taking up most of the piece, especially with its many swirling branches. Consistent with the name, *Tree of Life*, I see the swirls as numerous pathways in life, not always direct, likely with many tangents – not necessarily unproductive or wasteful – but in this time-constrained slot for reflection I am mindful of the many tangents this painting invites and on which I could go here, but won't. Because I am drawn to the odd juxtaposition of the gildedness of the painting and the stark image of a stump in Isaiah's proclamation, my focus has rested on Advent notions of 'remnant' and 'icon'.

An icon, usually gilded, is generally considered a visual representation that points beyond itself and the viewer to God, whereas a remnant contains and conveys something about what came before - the 'prior' or origin. In the case of our context here, a remnant also points to God as *the Origin* – in this case, the Root. In the book our house group is using this Advent¹, the image that author Jane Williams selected for *Root of Jesse* IS an icon, complete with gold leaf throughout. I believe that Klimt's image is an icon as well, even if not his intention – although his Golden Period is said to have been at least partly inspired by the gold-infused Byzantine mosaics of San Vitale in Ravenna which he visited twice. Through a Christian lens, I see God revealed in just about every image in *Tree of Life*.

Any doubt about this painting's suitability for an Advent reflection are dashed upon discovery of the names for the two seemingly opposed images at either edge. On the left,

¹ Jane Williams, *The Art of Advent* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2019).

the woman with Egyptian features and an associated gesture is called *Anticipation*. On the right, the embracing couple is called *Fulfilment*. Between them is the Tree of Life. It is hard not to see some profound Incarnational symbolism there, especially as we enter into the season of Advent waiting in anticipation for the fulfilment of the promise of Emmanuel.

Klimt was inspired by Egyptian mythology in painting this piece, and some say he saw the embracing couple as Isis and Osiris, intimating his own search for love and eternity. Through a Christian lens, we can see embrace, love and union – perhaps God and Israel, God and creation, Christ and his Church, a new Adam and a new Eve, or the perfect Love of God embodied in an embrace.

Also between them *on* the tree is a black bird, which usually represents death or forewarns it. We might see it as a symbolic reference to both the Tree of Life in the Garden from which humanity fell through disobedience and was exiled, and the tree of the cross, through which humanity was redeemed through the obedience of Jesus, even to death.

In a vertical aspect, Klimt connects three worlds of concern to humanity: life, death and eternity, represented by the underworld, heaven and earth. He portrays a symbolic union of heaven and earth with the tree reaching upward from its roots, and seems to acknowledge the soil from which we came and will return.

This also carries a genealogical connotation.

Isaiah proclaims that ‘a shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots’ (Is 11:1). It was not out of abundance and thriving that this shoot emerged but from a remnant – and not a particularly attractive one, a stump – although it is consistent with promoting growth in a garden by pruning, sometimes cutting away all but a remnant.

The prophets often speak of a remnant – a remnant of Israel – which is a testament to both the devastation of Israel and its hope. In the devastation, something remains. This word ‘remnant’ and related images are found all throughout Isaiah, including the passages before and after today’s reading. In the two verses that follow the ones we just heard, the prophet speaks of this remnant: ‘the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples. . . On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people’ (Is 1:10-11).

There is something in the expression of the woman on the left, *Anticipation*, that seems to indicate she is aware of both what is lost or what she is missing and what is promised as she looks with either longing or disdain toward *Fulfilment*. Interestingly, she herself seems to be wearing a garment of remnants.

Out of desolation come life and abundance. After the disobedience and fall of humanity, after the fall of Israel, comes a shoot, which Isaiah prophetically saw grow into a mighty tree – Christ, come to dwell among us and to restore us to the Garden, from our exile, to a place where everything finds its proper meaning and symmetry, just as Isaiah lyrically describes the world put right by God (Is 11:6-9). All hope is not lost. We are grafted into the remnant deemed worthy by God of saving, even in our current fallenness. Hope springs *from* the

devastation, not separate from it. The remnant to which Isaiah and other prophets refer is also a kind of icon – it points beyond to the hope of the Incarnation and new creation with a restored relationship with the Creator and Master Gardener. Christ is the root and the remnant to which we are grafted in. The Advent acclamation calls Jesus ‘the root’ of the tree; he is not just its product but also its source.

The abundance of the garden in Klimt’s tree of life is seen through its many branches, just starting to bloom. In this painting, we don’t see a stump or a shoot but we do see patterns rising up through the root and trunk and spreading to other parts of the tree and of the painting. These images remind me of seeds. Seeds are remnants from a harvest that anticipate new life – they spread, and perhaps take root and produce, in a cycle of sowing and reaping, of death and new life. As someone who is increasingly reminded of my remnant status among new shoots, this cycle is encouraging, because as Isaiah proclaims, the Spirit rests on the shoot from the Root of Jesse (I 11:1-2) in whom we are grafted and for whom we wait with anticipation. And through inspiration of the Spirit, thoughts, ideas, innovations and creativity continue to spark, which I believe is true for all of us no matter how ‘stump-like’ we may feel.

Not just new things will blossom, but the tree that looks dead will blossom again.

Rooted in Christ, we have an organic connection to him, and therefore to each other, as fellow grafted.

A couple months ago, in celebration of Harvest, we shared from its fruits together and also reflected on the seeds we sow among our congregation. Many of us provided seeds for others to take home and nurture. Likewise, many of us took home seeds that others provided - reminders that we are nurtured by and connected to our family of faith here at Saint Andrews beyond time spent together in church on Sunday. Still other seeds that we as a community brought on Harvest Sunday are waiting to be planted here in the church where we can see in this space the beauty of what we sow together as a community grafted in to Christ. We are called to a commitment to this family, to help tend to our community, especially in fellowship, even if someone happens to be sitting in our favourite pew on a particular week. Throughout this growing season we were asked to contemplate how we have reaped from what others have sown and the ways our church community is nurtured from what we sow (keeping in mind we may not always know); and we were asked to be mindful how we as a community are growing together. If we are not, if we have divisions, if some are disconnected, then we each have work to do as those claiming to be rooted in Christ.

At this time of the growing cycle, as in this season of Advent we are called to prepare the soil and wait.

May we look with hopeful anticipation toward the fulfilment of the promise of the shoot rooted in the Creator and Gardener of the Tree of Life, recognising that we are also grafted in the remnant of what and who has come before, especially the One who will come again.

O Come O Radix Jesse.

O Radix

All of us sprung from one deep-hidden seed,
Rose from a root invisible to all.
We knew the virtues once of every weed,
But, severed from the roots of ritual,
We surf the surface of a wide screen world
And find no virtue in the virtual.
We shrivel on the edges of a wood
Whose heart we once inhabited in love,
Now we have need of you, forgotten Root,
The stock and stem of every living thing
Whom once we worshipped in the sacred grove,
For now is winter, now is withering
Unless we let you root us deep within,
Under the ground of being, graft us in.

(Malcolm Guite)