
GANZ NOTES ON “ADVENT” BY CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

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Wikipedia – **Christina Georgina Rossetti (5 December 1830 – 29 December 1894)** was an English poet who wrote romantic, devotional, and children's poems. "Goblin Market" and "Remember" remain famous. She also wrote the words of two Christmas carols well known in the UK: "In the Bleak Midwinter", later set by Gustav Holst and by Harold Darke, and "Love Came Down at Christmas", also set by Darke and by other composers. She was a sister of the artist and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti and features in several of his paintings.

Mark Pallant¹ writes: “Christina Rossetti was born in London to an artistic family — her brother was the famous poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti and her house was a regular meeting place for the group of artists later called the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. She was a devout Anglican, who despite a lifetime of illness, continued to write poetry.”

Rachel Mann - Christina Rossetti was born on 5 December 1830 into a prominent Anglo-Italian family. Casual readers of her work will almost certainly know that she is the sister of one of the nineteenth century's most prominent artists and poets, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and may wish to set her with the Pre-Raphaelite Movement of which Dante Gabriel was part. Christina, however, is so much more. In recent years, her deep Anglican faith has been reckoned as significant not only as a key to understanding her poetry of faith, but as valuable to a mature understanding of her secular verse.³ Indeed, there are grounds for saying that in her mature poetry, one should not be too rigid in separating her poetry into the sacred and the profane. For, running through her writing and her understanding of the world – ecological, aesthetic, personal and political – is her Anglo-Catholicism. [Rachel Mann. *In the Bleak Midwinter: Advent and Christmas with Christina Rossetti* (p. 7). Canterbury Press Norwich. Kindle Edition.]

Rachel Mann, *In the Bleak Midwinter: Advent and Christmas with Christina Rossetti*

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¹ See: <https://markpallant.wordpress.com/2012/12/14/79/>.

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THE LITURGICAL YEAR – “The most transformational encounter came during Advent 1848. Rossetti heard the Apocalyptic sermons – ‘The Signs of the Times’ – preached at Christ Church by Dodsworth. Their impact was such that the poet never lost that sense of wonder and the expectation of **the Second Coming of Christ**. Running alongside that encounter was one with Keble’s poetry. In 1827 John Keble had published a book of poems, *The Christian Year*, that traced his devotional response to the liturgical year.² While Rossetti’s brother, William Michael, claimed that his sister thought nothing of Keble as a poet, her copy of Keble’s *The Christian Year* was heavily annotated, and arguably **taught her much about the way time and space can be constructed very differently from the mercantile, secular and consumerist world emerging in the nineteenth century.**” And a little further on: “Just as that era saw the emergence of new attention on the Eucharist and the renewal of the Religious Life in Anglicanism (with which Rossetti can claim personal connection), it saw **a powerful recovery of what we might call ‘divine time’.** **This notion that the year might be structured through a divine lens** is reflected in her commitment to produce poems for various seasons and saints’ days.” [Rachel Mann. *In the Bleak Midwinter: Advent and Christmas with Christina Rossetti* (pp. 8-9). Canterbury Press Norwich. Kindle Edition.]

LITURGICAL “HOURS” – We recall how profoundly impactful the monastic discipline of ordering each day, unchangeably, with the observance in the monastic Church/Chapel of the “hours”.

Britannica at “**Canonical Hours**” – “Canonical hours, in music, settings of the public prayer service (divine office) of the Roman Catholic Church, divided into **Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline.** The early monastic communities composed a complete series of hours for morning, noon, and evening; cathedral and parish churches had incorporated all the hours by the 8th century, and by the 9th century the structure was fixed.”

See the summary of the “Liturgy of the Hours” in Wikipedia given below:

² In footnote #4 to this chapter, Rachel Mann writes: “The critic Mary Arseneau has argued that **John Keble’s poetics suggest that Christ’s incarnation acts as the meeting point of this world and the next. She then argues that Rossetti’s poetry effectively takes this idea to the next level; in effect, it embodies Keble’s idea about the incarnation.** Rossetti’s poetry is not simply about pointing beyond this life, but in grounding flourishing Christian community in this life. Christ acts as the incarnational fulcrum to which serious human living – ethical and spiritual – orientates.” [Rachel Mann. *In the Bleak Midwinter: Advent and Christmas with Christina Rossetti* (p. 13). Canterbury Press Norwich. Kindle Edition.]

By the time of Saint Benedict of Nursia, the monastic Liturgy of the Hours was composed of seven daytime hours and one at night. He associated the practice with Psalm 118/119:164, "Seven times a day I praise you", and Psalm 118/119:62, "At midnight I rise to praise you".^[19] Of these eight hours, Prime and Compline may be the latest to appear, because the 4th-century Apostolic Constitutions VIII iv 34 do not mention them in the exhortation "Offer up your prayers in the morning, at the third hour, the sixth, the ninth, the evening, and at cock-crowing".^[20] The eight are known by the following names, which do not reflect the times of day at which in the second millennium they have traditionally been recited, as shown by the use of the word "noon", derived from Latin (*hora*) *nona*,^{[21][22]} to mean midday, not 3 in the afternoon:

- **Matins** (during the night, at about 2 a.m.); also called **Vigil** and perhaps composed of two or three **Nocturns**
- **Lauds** or Dawn Prayer (at dawn, about 5 a.m., but earlier in summer, later in winter)
- **Prime** or Early Morning Prayer (First Hour = approximately 6 a.m.)
- **Terce** or Mid-Morning Prayer (Third Hour = approximately 9 a.m.)
- **Sext** or Midday Prayer (Sixth Hour = approximately 12 noon)
- **None** or Mid-Afternoon Prayer (Ninth Hour = approximately 3 p.m.)
- **Vespers** or Evening Prayer ("at the lighting of the lamps", about 6 p.m.)
- **Compline** or Night Prayer (before retiring, about 7 p.m.)

This arrangement of the Liturgy of the Hours is described by Saint Benedict. However, it is found in Saint John Cassian's *Institutes and Conferences*,^{[23][failed verification]} which describe the monastic practices of the Desert Fathers of Egypt.

ABRAHAM HESCHEL (1907-1972) – In Abraham Heschel's famous book *The Sabbath*, he articulates how Judaism is not a religion to do with sacred *spaces* but with sacred *Time*. What is done with Time is the key. In his Prologue called "The Architecture of Time" he writes: "Technical civilization is man's conquest of space. It is a triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely, time. In technical civilization, we expend time to gain space. To enhance our power in the world of space is our main objective. **Yet to have more does not mean to be more.** The power we attain in the world of space terminates abruptly at the borderline of time. **But time is the heart of existence....** To gain control of the world of space is certainly one of our tasks. The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. **There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.** Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern." [Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath* (FSG Classics). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition.]

RECLAIMING ADVENT – "Ours is a time when consumerism and conspicuous consumption have become the norm. Christmas – which, as a concept, has so dominated Advent in the popular mind that Advent barely registers – has become the defining focus for the consumption of 'stuff'. Advent – that **great season of discipline, preparation and fasting**³ – has become so lost that if it registers at all in the popular mind, it is as a kind of reverse of classic meanings of Advent." [Rachel Mann. *In the Bleak Midwinter: Advent and Christmas with Christina Rossetti* (p. 10). Canterbury Press Norwich. Kindle Edition.]

GOD'S TIME – "As Christians, we must take a fair share of the blame for creating conditions in which defining yourself by what you can afford to buy others (or oneself) are the norm.

³ The "fasting" in Advent is of a completely different nature than the fasting that happens during Lent. In Lent, the "fasting" is meant to challenge the power of our unconscious (i.e., habitual) habits of consumption of all kinds – what we feel is necessary "nourishment" feeding our insatiable desires. In Advent, the "fasting" is more to do with excitement, with joyful anticipation – hope as "anticipatory consciousness" – of the Incarnation, of the God-Man born of woman. So, the Advent "fasting" is not so much about self-abnegation as it is what happens when we are so excited by something almost here, that we just "forget" to eat (in ways real and metaphorical).

However, Rossetti's extraordinarily astute and astringent poetry – often ravishing in its discipline and surprise – is alert to all these issues. **She – as much as any Christian of our time – wishes to reclaim a sense of God's time. The poems contained here testify to that. Rossetti treats Advent as a time of preparation, reflection and discipline with profound seriousness.** In the poem 'Advent' she writes of 'our good things long deferred, / With Jesus Christ our Best.'" [Rachel Mann. *In the Bleak Midwinter: Advent and Christmas with Christina Rossetti* (p. 11). Canterbury Press Norwich. Kindle Edition.]

ADVENT – This English word is from the Latin, fourth-conjugation verb *advenire* meaning "to come to a place; to arrive at." But in its perfect-passive participle form – *adventus -a -um* – it means that the act of coming/arriving is now completed, or that what or who was *arriving is now present*. But what I have taught in the last ten years or so is that Advent can be better understood as *what happens* or, more significantly, *Who meets us*, when we boldly set out, when we take a risk and move with it, when we set a goal and go for it. In this way, Advent and Adventure are clearly related. And, I like to teach that **it is not possible for us to set out on an adventure**; we can only set out on a journey in the way described above. Why? **Because an adventure is something or someone unexpected that meets us** sometime after we have set out, have taken a risk, have endeavored a great thing (goal). In this regard, what we *thought* would be the nature of the journey towards a goal turns out to be so different! Something or Someone met us on the journey that completely changed the nature, even the purpose, of the journey that we boldly took.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2020 – **Mark 13:32-37** - Rather than focusing on how his followers could calculate when the final curtain would fall, Jesus' message throughout Mark 13 is how they should prepare for their immediate future, which would include both mission and suffering. **There are nineteen imperatives in this one chapter— commands about *what faithful behavior looks like in a time of unprecedented catastrophe*.** What Jesus envisioned for his followers was not some sort of fervor for or questioning about the eschatological events to come, **but rather a determined and single-minded obedience to cross bearing (8: 34– 38) and sharing in Jesus' ministry to the world.** Here in verses 32– 37 Jesus brings his message about the end times to a conclusion by underlining again that what will be needed in the future is faith and vigilance.⁴

I would suggest that the "**faith and vigilance**" mentioned above is not as much about worry about enemies at the gate as it is about "catching people alive" (Luke 5), about being the first to notice how God is present, active and effective in our world, but more concretely, in the circumstances in which we are living and working. A few years ago I wrote, in relation to Psalm 130 – "We must learn how, because Jesus came to teach us this, *to be people who know how to hunt for and to find the goodness of a person* (not the badness of a person) – "he does not quench

⁴ *Feasting on the Gospels - Mark: A Feasting on the Word Commentary* (Kindle Locations 14761-14767). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

the wavering flame” – and to do all that we can to get him or her to trust that goodness, and to practice that goodness, and to be accountable for that goodness (which means above all to be accountable for sharing that goodness with others).”

I think that **Psalm 130** is strongly represented in this poem, especially in the second half of that Psalm:

⁵ I wait for the LORD,
my soul waits
and I hope for his word.^c
⁶ My soul looks for the Lord
more than sentinels for daybreak.^d
More than sentinels for daybreak,
⁷ let Israel hope in the LORD,
For with the LORD is mercy,
with him is plenteous redemption,^e
⁸ And he will redeem Israel
from all its sins.^{f 5}

1.

^c Ps 119:81.

^d Is 21:11; 26:9.

^e Ps 86:15; 100:5; 103:8.

^f Ps 25:22; Mt 1:21.

⁵ [*New American Bible*](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ps 130:5–8.

This Advent⁶ moon⁷ shines cold and clear⁸,
These Advent nights are long⁹;
Our lamps have burned year after year,
And still¹⁰ their flame is strong.¹¹
“Watchman, what of the night?” we cry,
Heart-sick¹² with hope deferred¹³:

⁶ “**Advent** - The season of preparation for Christmas, known also in some Eastern churches as the season of Announcement. The Prayer of this season “looks forward” in relation to **the triple coming of the Lord: in history, in grace, at the end of time**. Its tone is of *anticipation, expectation, yearning*. [Peter E. Fink, *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 30.]

⁷ That she picked the Moon is interesting, because the Moon without the Light of the Sun on it, would be both lightless and invisible to us on Earth. The Moon is a kind of Sign in the sky when darkness has overwhelmed the world (at least from where we are standing in the night) that the Sun still blazes ... even though we are unable to see it. The God-Man was, if you will, a kind of Moon who reflected the Light of His Father – “If you have seen me / you have seen the Father.”

⁸ She is insightful about Nature here: in Wintertime it is coldest when the sky is clear. But “**cold and clear**” sets up a nice tension in the opening line: we experience the cold as something from which we want/need to protect ourselves, while clarity is a gift of sight which we may seek.

⁹ I enjoy the dry wit I hear in the poet. I can imagine her tone of voice saying “These darned nights of Winter are awfully long!” But I am curious that she chose to add the qualifier – these “*Advent* nights”. Suddenly, by her adding that, the “long” of the line changes, to my reading, into “longing”. That is, when “Advent” is what the “long” is about, it changes the experience of Time from being about *mere duration* into a fruitful time, *a longing time*.

¹⁰ “**still**” – This adverb is consoling, because it suggests to me that those among whom the author is finding her life are people of strong faith. The “**their**” of this line could refer to the lamps – commenting on the unwavering flame in each of them – or it could refer to those holding those lamps, where the “flame” is a symbol of the unwavering faith, hope, and love of her community of friends.

¹¹ I am assuming her reference is to **the Parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25** - 1 “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish and five were wise. 3 The foolish ones, when taking their lamps, brought no oil with them, 4 but the wise brought flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 Since the bridegroom was long delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep. 6 **At midnight, there was a cry, ‘Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’** [New American Bible, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Mt 25:1–6.]

¹² “**heart-sick**” – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**heart-sick**” – “Chiefly in predicative use. Suffering emotional pain, such as grief, **frustrated longing**, or disappointment; sick at heart, depressed, despondent. Also (esp. in early use): suffering from physical ill health attributed to the heart; *spec.* nauseous.”

¹³ “**hope deferred**” – There is a compression in this expression that makes it difficult to sort out. I think that what she means is that to live in hope means to await what is not yet, what is “deferred”. I think of Hebrews 11: 1 Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen. 2 Because of it the ancients were

“No speaking signs¹⁴ are in the sky,”
Is still¹⁵ the watchman’s word.

2.

The Porter¹⁶ watches¹⁷ at the gate,
The servants watch within;
The watch is long betimes¹⁸ and late¹⁹,
The prize is slow to win.²⁰
“Watchman, what of the night?”²¹ but still²²
His answer sounds the same:

well attested. [*New American Bible, Revised Edition*. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Heb 11:1–2.]

¹⁴ “**speaking signs**” – We would expect that it is the watchman who speaks of signs that he or she sees or hears in the night, rather than the signs themselves as able to “speak, unless Rossetti is talking about the angel host that appeared in the night school over Bethlehem – the “speaking signs” were Angels!

¹⁵ “**still**” – Her repetition of this adverb in the same stanza increases in us the tension we experience – “frustrated longing”.

¹⁶ “**Porter**” – Why she capitalizes this noun is not clear to me. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun “**porter**” – “A gatekeeper, esp. at the entrance of a fortified town or castle; a doorkeeper; (now) esp. an employee in charge of the entrance of a hotel, block of flats, college, or other large building.” The “porter” during the centuries of fortified cities or castles had a highest-level role/responsibility: it was he who personally knew all who had a right to pass in through the fortified door, who had discernment about a guest wanting entrance who did not seem right. The person with the power to let in or to keep out was a very necessary person!

¹⁷ “**watch**” – Notice how often this verb is repeated in this one stanza.

¹⁸ “**betimes**” – I am not confident about how to use this word. I believe it is an adverb here, but still not sure the meaning. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adverb “**betimes**” – “At an early time, period, or season; early in the year; early in life.” Or, “*spec.* At an early hour, early in the morning.”

¹⁹ “**and late**” – This could refer in the sense that St. Augustine meant it when he wrote in Confessions X: “late have I loved you / beauty ever ancient, ever new”, and so Rossetti meaning that it took her long to learn how to wait “as a watchman waits for the dawn.”

²⁰ “**the prize**” – It is not clear who or what “the prize” is. However, when one has waited on a “cold and clear” winter night, through all hours of the night, for the coming of the dawn and then the sunrise, “the prize” is obvious: (1) the Sun; or (2) my watch is concluded, meaning that I don’t have to try to keep myself awake, to endure the long and penetrating cold of the night.

²¹ This question put to the Watchmen, repeated, has a liturgical feel to it: the question one always asks him.

²² “**still**” – Again this adverb, the repetition of which in the poem captures the tension, **perhaps impatience**, of waiting for someone or something that *still* is not here.

“No daybreak tops the utmost hill,
Nor pale our lamps of flame.”²³

3.

One to another²⁴ hear them speak,²⁵
The patient virgins wise²⁶:
“Surely He is not far to seek,” –
“All night we watch and rise.”
“The days are evil looking back,²⁷
The coming days are dim;
Yet count we not His promise slack,²⁸
But watch and wait for Him.”²⁹

4.

One with another,³⁰ soul with soul,
They kindle fire from fire:

²³ We would expect his first reply – “no daybreak” yet. But that he would also remark about the “lamps of flame” as bright and steady, not “pale”, is unexpected. However, “the flame is strong” in the first stanza is echoed here in “nor pale” – **the waiting and watching**, therefore, is what remains “strong” or “not pale.”

²⁴ Notice how this stanza begins with “One *to* another...”; the next stanza begins “One *with* another...”

²⁵ “**hear them speak**” – In a contemplative involvement with the wise virgins of Matthew 25:1-6, Rossetti hear their voices, talking to each other as they wait. I believe that we hear *three* of them have their say. Rossetti invites us to join her in her contemplation of that biblical scene.

²⁶ How she shifts from imagery associated with Psalm 130, to the Parable of the Virgins (Matthew 25:1-6) who await, with lamps ready to light, the Bridegroom returning to his house with his bride. See at the end of this poem (below) the comments of R.T. France on Matthew 25:1-6.

²⁷ This comment, from the third of the wise virgins, suggests that she is the wisest of the three, who answers here the comments of the first two.

²⁸ “**slack**” – The Oxford English Dictionary at the adjective “slack” – “Of persons: lacking in energy or diligence; inclined to be lazy or idle; remiss, careless; negligent or lax in regard to one's duties.”

²⁹ We now are left with no doubts as to who or what it is that we are waiting in this poem. We “watch and wait **for Him**.”

³⁰ I think that Rossetti means here the same group of wise virgins, whose holy conversation, one with another, is the real “lamp” that matters – the “lamp” of faith and hope and love – which matters more than the flame in their oil lamps. But I am not sure, because these are they “who have touched the goal”, which suggests those in dialogue here are the Blessed or the Angels. It is as if her contemplation of Matthew 25 carries her suddenly in and among the Saints and Angels in glory, where she hears their conversation and watches how it causes them to incandesce with beauty – “they kindle fire from fire.”

“Friends³¹ watch us who have touched the goal.”
“They urge us, come up higher.”³²
“With them shall rest our waysore feet,
With them is built our home,³³
With Christ.” “They sweet, but He most sweet,
Sweeter than honeycomb.”³⁴

5.

There³⁵ no more parting, no more pain,
The distant ones brought near,
The lost so long are found again,
Long lost but longer dear:
Eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard,

³¹ “**Friends**” – This is perhaps the most important word in the entire poem. This waiting long and difficult is only kept “strong” and “bright” when we have the encouragement of friends who, wiser and more experienced on the spiritual path than we – “who have touched the goal”. Rossetti could be referring to the actual circle of her Christian friends, including her brother, as well as to the Oxford Tractarians (e.g., John Keble), but I sense that she might be referring to the Communion of Saints, about whom **Hebrews 12** speaks: 1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by **so great a cloud of witnesses**, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us* and persevere in running the race that lies before us 2 while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith. [*New American Bible, Revised Edition*. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Heb 12:1–2.]

³² In this stanza one of the three meanings of Advent is emphasized: **the Second Coming** (the other two – see the earlier footnote – being (1) the historical coming of the God-Man, and (2) the coming of divine grace in our historical lives here). But what is striking is that she envisions the Second Coming as not so much about Jesus Christ in glory coming *here*, but that we are called “higher”, summoned to go *there*.

³³ “**our home**” – Notice the courtesy of Heaven here: it is not “God’s home” but “our home.” And, expressing an insight that came to me with force some years ago, teaching me that *Heaven is not a place, but a kind of relationship*. The reason that I have always felt homeless, that I did not belong (or better, that I belonged to so many people, but that I belonged to no one, or ones, in particular), is that the relationship God planted within me to seek, for which to long, I have never found here, in this world, at least not yet. I say this not disrespecting even slightly my dear friends, but I mean that the friends I have sought, and with whom I feel closer to “home”, are they who themselves know, and feel, that even a best friend is still not that for which we were created: “For you have made us *for Yourself* / and our hearts are restless / until they rest in Thee.”

³⁴ Perhaps a reference to **Psalms 19** - 11 More desirable than gold, / than a hoard of purest gold, / Sweeter also than honey / or drippings from the comb. [*New American Bible, Revised Edition*. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ps 19:11.]

³⁵ “**There**” – In spiritual literature, this adverb is so powerful, where it means our heavenly home, the “place” that finally explains that which is the source of the “unsatisfied desire / more desirable than any other satisfaction” (C.S. Lewis), that explains why we never felt able to be “home” *here*.

Nor heart conceived that rest,³⁶
With them our good things long deferred,³⁷
With Jesus Christ our Best.³⁸

6.

We³⁹ weep because the night is long,
We laugh, for day shall rise,
We sing a slow contented song
And knock at Paradise.⁴⁰
Weeping we hold Him fast⁴¹ Who wept
For us, – we hold Him fast;⁴²

³⁶ Rossetti quoting from one of the great mystical texts of St. Paul at **1 Corinthians 2:6-10**, who himself quotes from Isaiah 64 (see full text given below, after this poem).

³⁷ **“our good things long deferred”** – In stanza 1, Rossetti speaks of “hope deferred”. But now she clarifies that it was “our good things” that were the object of our feeling of HOPE. And “our good things” she means is fellowship among the Blessed – **“with them” there**, and all of us **“with Jesus Christ our Best.”**

³⁸ Rossetti expresses herself, her personal devotion, winningly here – “With Jesus Christ our Best” – a charming, *familiar* way of speaking about Him. But notice that she does not say “He’s the best!” Rather she says, “Jesus Christ *our* Best.” Notice again the universality of this Gift of God to humanity. But “our Best” could also mean that through the Incarnation – the way Jesus Christ lived His life, showing us again what we had long forgotten: how to be a human being, to do that well – we see what a human being can be, is meant by God to become ... **at its best.**

³⁹ **“We”** – Notice in this stanza how often she uses this pronoun. The intimacy she describes might cause us to guess that she would say **“I”** weep ... laugh ... sing ... knock ... not let Him go”. That “we” is powerful, as well as it is theologically adept: every personal grace we have from God is for everyone.

⁴⁰ Rossetti’s mystical gift now appears luminously. And again what is striking is how the Second Coming of Christ is not so much about Him “coming on the clouds of Heaven ... to judge the living and the dead” **as it is about us finally able to go home**, to “knock at Paradise”, for that Golden Door to be opened to us, and we clinging to “our Best”, to Jesus our Lord, Whom “we will not let go.” This is extraordinarily lovely.

⁴¹ **“fast”** – This is the same root from which we have our verb “to fasten”. And it nicely captures what the “fasting” of Advent is all about: a longing for, a clinging to the object of our hope, Jesus Christ ... such that other things that we habitually cling to just cease to matter to us. Notice how “fast” in this stanza rhymes with “last”.

⁴² **“we hold him fast”** – A powerful expression of Rossetti’s devotion to Jesus, to His physical presence. Notice how she repeats this. We are reminded of Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb (John 20:11-18), and in particular where she is clinging to Him so strongly that He, with beautiful laughter and not a little humor says to her in verse 17 - ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.”

And will not let Him go except
He bless us first or last.⁴³

7.

Weeping we hold Him fast to-night;
We will not let Him go
Till daybreak smite our wearied sight,
And summer smite the snow:
Then figs shall bud, and dove with dove
Shall coo the livelong day⁴⁴;
Then He shall say, "Arise, My love,
My fair one, come away."⁴⁵

Stanza 3 - Regarding the Parable at Matthew 25:1-6 – The second parable about being ready adopts a more social setting for its story. Weddings provided one of the high points in village life, and the question of who was and was not included affected one's social standing. Our knowledge of Jewish wedding customs⁴⁴ at the time is limited, leaving scholars to suggest analogies from other cultures; but it is probably wiser to admit our ignorance. This story mentions only two parties, the bridegroom and the ten girls. The precise role of the latter in the ceremonies is not clear (which is why it is perhaps better to avoid so culture-specific a term as

⁴³ I keep "hearing" the poem by **Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ (1844-1889)**, "The Lantern Out of Doors", whose closing stanza is: "Christ minds: Christ's interest, what to avow or amend / There, eyes them, heart wants, care haunts, foot follows kind, / Their ransom, their rescue, and first, fast, last friend." Hopkins was a contemporary of Rossetti, and he also was powerfully affected by the Oxford Tractarians. For example, John Henry Newman was he who brought Hopkins into the Catholic Church.

⁴⁴ "**livelong day**" – Notice how throughout the entire poem to this point, the unending length of time, the long hours of waiting through a "clear and cold" night, the unceasing waiting was experienced as something difficult, even very difficult. But now time spent with one's Beloved wants/needs/demands that it be a long time, an unending time.

⁴⁵ Rossetti's mystical flight intensifies here. She relies on perhaps the single most important mystical text of the entire Bible – **the Song of Songs, or the Song of Solomon** – upon which so many mystics of the greatest light commented at some point in their writings. Here Rossetti is clearly indebted to the experience that the Song of Songs 2 describes, as for example at 2:10 - My lover speaks and says to me, / "Arise, my friend, my beautiful one, / and come! [*New American Bible, Revised Edition*. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), So 2:10.]

⁴⁴ A. W. Argyle, *ExpT* 86 (1974/5) 214–215, provides data to show how this parable fits in with what we know of wedding customs at the time.

“bridesmaids”),⁴⁵ but the Greek term (literally “virgins”) indicates unmarried⁴⁶ friends or relatives of either the bride or the bridegroom.⁴⁷ The story tells us that their role included escorting the bridegroom in a torchlight procession (and dance?) to his house, but that they were not present at whatever part of the ceremonies immediately preceded this procession. The unexpected delay at that point in the proceedings may have been caused by extended bargaining over the financial settlement,⁴⁸ or by any number of other causes, deliberate or accidental. It does not matter; all that matters is the delay, and the effect it had on the readiness of the girls when the time for their part in the ceremonies eventually arrived. The sequel to the procession is the wedding feast⁴⁹ in the bridegroom’s house, the high point of the celebration. To miss that is to miss everything, and the ending of the story again shades off into the language of eschatological judgment, with the emphatic closure of the door, and the unavailing appeal by the excluded girls.⁴⁶

Stanza 5 – Her reference here to one of the great mystical passages in St. Paul at 1 Corinthians 2:6-10:

^{*45} I. H. Jones, *Parables* 446 etc, more appropriately identifies them as the “bridegroom’s maids of honour.” R. Zimmermann, *NTS* 48 (2002) 48–70, gives a detailed account of Hellenistic-Roman marriage customs, which he argues would apply also in Jewish circles at the time, **and proposes that the girls are servants from the bridegroom’s house, awaiting the return of the bridegroom with his bride after the wedding feast at her house** (see, however, n. 49 below: the γάμοι which take place after the arrival at the bridegroom’s house more naturally refers to the wedding feast—or did they have two feasts?!).

^{*46} And therefore at most in their early teens; see on 1:18.

⁴⁷ Albright & Mann, 302, declare confidently that “they would always have been attendant on the bride, never the bridegroom” (and for that reason support the minority reading “and the bride” in v. 1, see p. 933, n. 14). It may indeed have been their duties to the bride that required them to greet the bridegroom, but as the bride plays no part in the story this need not be mentioned. See J. Jeremias, *Parables* 172–173, for possible cultural parallels which may throw doubt on the confident assertion of Albright & Mann.

^{*48} So J. Jeremias, *Parables* 172–174, though it may be questioned how far the features of modern Arab weddings which he describes reflect Jewish practice two millennia ago.

^{*49} The term used in v. 10 is simply τοὺς γάμους, but we have seen in 22:1–10 that the plural can be used specifically for the wedding *feast*; see p. 820, n. 4.

⁴⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 946–947.

The True Wisdom. * ⁶ Yet we do speak a wisdom to those who are mature, but not a wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age who are passing away. ⁷ Rather, we speak God's wisdom, * mysterious, hidden, which God predetermined before the ages for our glory, ⁸ and which none of the rulers of this age * knew; for, if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But as it is written:

“What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard,
and what has not entered the human heart,
what God has prepared for those who love him,”^e

^{10f} this God has revealed to us through the Spirit.
For the Spirit scrutinizes everything, even the depths of God. ⁴⁷

* Paul now asserts paradoxically what he has previously been denying. To the Greeks who “are looking for wisdom” (1 Cor 1:22), he does indeed bring a wisdom, but of a higher order and an entirely different quality, the only wisdom really worthy of the name. The Corinthians would be able to grasp Paul's preaching as wisdom and enter into a wisdom-conversation with him if they were more open to the Spirit and receptive to the new insight and language that the Spirit teaches.

* *God's wisdom*: his plan for our salvation. This was his own eternal secret that no one else could fathom, but in this new age of salvation he has graciously revealed it to us. For the pattern of God's secret, hidden to others and now revealed to the Church, cf. also Rom 11:25–36; 16:25–27; Eph 1:3–10; 3:3–11; Col 1:25–28.

* *The rulers of this age*: this suggests not only the political leaders of the Jews and Romans under whom Jesus was crucified (cf. Acts 4:25–28) but also the cosmic powers behind them (cf. Eph 1:20–23; 3:10). *They would not have crucified the Lord of glory*: they became the unwitting executors of God's plan, which will paradoxically bring about their own conquest and submission (1 Cor 15:24–28).

^e Is 64:3.

^f Mt 11:25; 13:11; 16:17.

⁴⁷ [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), 1 Co 2:6–10.