

Advent 3 2025

Matthew 11.2-11

Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

In Plato's *Symposium*, set at a drinking party in which a gaggle of Greek philosophers pontificate about the nature and virtues of love, the fictionalised Aristophanes offers a myth about the origins of romantic love.

Once upon a time, he says, people looked very different than they do now. Indeed, they were round in shape, and in possession of four arms and four feet, and one head with two faces, looking opposite ways. They could walk forwards and backwards, and also sort of cartwheel around when they wanted to move with haste. One day, these spheroid proto-humans decided to rebel, and attempt to invade the realm of the gods. By way of punishment, Zeus thus cleft them in twain, sewing them upend tying a knot at the belly—this is, of course, why we have navels. And ever since then, we have felt incomplete until we have found our other halves. I don't know what Plato was drinking when he wrote this, but I'd like some too, please.

This is, sort of, the ancient origin of the idea of *soulmates*, though it is to Samuel Taylor Coleridge that we owe the phrase, in a letter to a young lady, giving her advice about marriage. You might think this ironic, since his marriage to Sara Fricker was famously an unhappy one. The tone of letter is germane: Coleridge is deeply pessimistic about marriage, at one point describing it as tantamount to suicide. His advice to the woman is that, if she doesn't want to be miserable in marriage, then what she needs is a soul-mate.

This did not immediately trigger a cultural obsession for finding "the one". By the 1980s, however, it was the default assumption about marriage: that there was someone, out there, ready-made, just for you, and your job was to track them down, or wait for them to track you down. Only then would you have a happy marriage; only then, would you be made whole, return to prelapsarian perfection. What one is meant to do if one's true beloved grew up half the globe away if rarely specified.

This Aristophanean-Coleridgean belief in soul mates has, I am sure, led to unquantifiable disappointment and misery. But not because it is categorically false that there is only, at most, one perfect mate for any given person. For all I know, that's true. Love seems like such an improbable thing: that

thing of two people, somehow managing to truly love one another, in such a way that deserves the name “love”, and not some pale facsimile, some cheap imitation thereof. For all I know, It is true that destiny must be met if marital bliss is to be obtained.

No, it is not the numerical content of the theory that is the problem, but the arithmetic operation it is commonly taken to assert. The idea that if we find “the one”, then we are guaranteed “happily ever after” is the pernicious fiction that leads to unrealistic expectations about the work required to make marriage work, indeed to make love work. It is, in the end, a lazy philosophy of marital love, and one that misunderstands love altogether, neglects its role as a motivating, driving force towards goodness.

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There is a messianic theology of salvation that is analogous to the soulmate theory of love. It is the idea that, some day, God will send someone to sort everything out, and all we have to do is wait. Or, we might be able to somehow hasten the second coming of the Lord, whether with our prayers or our

missionary activity or our meddling in Middle Eastern politics. Genuinely, all three have been live options in Christian history, and indeed in some contemporary Christianity.

Of the two, the passive, quietist option might be the less corruptible. But we don't quite have to settle for the more benign of two theological options. Advent is a time of waiting: but our sense of what it mean to wait might require some correction. Nowadays, we think of waiting as a state of passivity, even of stagnation: in waiting, we are to stand still as the world moves around us, until it conforms to our desires or expectations. But this view of waiting is a betrayal of its etymology, which comes from the Old French, to watch or guard. It is not passivity that the term denotes, but vigilance. Less like waiting for a bus at a terminal station, and more like waiting for our stop in a moving bus; if we are not careful, we will find ourselves in the wrong place altogether. It is a term about preparation for action: what we are waiting for is to be moved, but to move ourselves. This is the sense of waiting still retained in English when we speak of waiters: a waiter was, and in a sense still is, a watchman.

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In other words: is now the time to move, to act? What are our marching orders? It expresses a desire to know what our next steps are, how we are to serve in the Kingdom of God that is to come, and which is already, in some sense, already here.

This is yet another thing that falling in love and becoming a Christian has in common. We are not left content to remain as we were; we are not content to leave the world as it is. In both cases, our discovery—of our beloved lover—compels us, not only to better ourselves but to better the whole world. The encounter with a love offered, which needs no earning, moves us all the more to become worthy of such a love that is given us. It moves us to want the world to be worthy to be the home of such a love as this.

Christ is indeed the One we have been waiting for, the Love that is the source and ground and consummation of all love, and who thus calls us to follow him in love and towards love. Our time of waiting is over, and we enter now the Promised Land: the world of God's promise of justice and peace, which is of course also the world of our baptismal vows,

through which we join in with God's mission as members of Christ's own Body, the Son of God, the Son of Mary, given also to live in you, and even me.