

## Waiting

Happy New Year! - Don't worry – I haven't lost the plot completely! Today of course is Advent Sunday, the day on which we begin the new church year, having bid farewell to the old year with the feast of Christ the King last Sunday. From a liturgical point of view, we move from Year A in which the gospel of Matthew is the main focus, to Year B and the gospel of Mark. It also marks the end of the Diocesan Year of the Bible, and heralds the start of The Year of Prayer. And I think it's very appropriate that we begin the new Church year in Advent, a season of preparation and waiting; a time when we consider what lies ahead; when we think about what is to come. A time of waiting.

A few years ago now, the Bible Scholar and Theologian, Paula Gooder, wrote an Advent book called: "The Meaning is in the Waiting" in which she talks about the need to embrace the discipline of waiting, uncomfortable and counter-cultural as it is these days. It is in active waiting, she suggests, that the true meaning of Advent can be clearly understood. As some of you may know, my sister lives in America. Last summer, she came over to stay for a week or so, and I had offered to go and pick her up from the airport. On the day she was due to arrive, I knew which airport she would be arriving at; I knew her flight number; I knew what time it was expected to land; electronic display boards kept me informed so I knew exactly what time her plane had landed; I knew when her suitcase had arrived in the baggage area; and I knew exactly which door she would eventually appear from in the arrivals hall. All I had to do was stand and wait for her to arrive, which she dutifully did some time later. Even though I knew almost exactly when she would appear, and even though I had all the latest up to date information to tell me what stage she was at in the process, I still found myself getting frustrated at having to wait for her; thinking about how much the car park would cost me as the minutes ticked by!

I'm not very good at waiting. And I'm not alone! Waiting isn't something most of us do easily. We are developing ever faster ways of having what we want, and reducing the time it takes to get it. Fast food restaurants where you can buy and receive meal in a matter of 1 or 2 minutes; on-line retailers offering guaranteed next day delivery; Amazon are even developing drones that will deliver parcels to your back garden within an hour of you placing the order. Our credit culture means that we no longer have to wait to afford what we want; we can buy now, and pay later. Why wait? Waiting is, increasingly, a strange notion. We have become accustomed to immediacy and rapid response.

So why does the Church even bother with Advent – four weeks dedicated to waiting? Is it not just another example of the Church being out of step with the modern world, looking backwards to a bygone era, to ideas no longer relevant to our society? Would it not be better to abandon Advent altogether? Well, some would argue that we've done that already, with Christmas trees being set up in church before Christmas Eve and carols sung up until Christmas Day and then abruptly stopped. So should the churches become guardians of Christmas and Advent, issuing edicts banning the singing of carols and eating of mince pies before Christmas Eve?

Well we could try, but I'm pretty sure it would fall on deaf ears and achieve very little. A more fruitful exercise, I would suggest, would instead be for us to concentrate on how we engage with the Season of Advent in a way that enables us to anticipate Christmas properly; to use Advent as a time of active waiting. This idea of active waiting is illustrated brilliantly by Paula Gooder in her book. She uses an example that I would never be able to speak about from personal experience, because she uses the example of her pregnancy to illustrate active waiting. Like me, she is very bad at waiting, and found herself somewhat bemused at encountering an experience that is all about waiting. As she says, no one who is expecting a child wants the waiting to end and the baby to come prematurely. The only thing to do in pregnancy is to wait.

It was this experience of enforced waiting that enabled her to discover that waiting is not just about passing the time, but instead that it has deep and lasting value in and of itself. As she waited for the birth of her baby, she discovered that waiting can in fact be a nurturing time, valuable in its own right. Her previous assumption that waiting could only ever be a passive activity in which you sit around drumming your fingers waiting for the time to pass was completely turned on its head. Pregnant waiting, she tells us, is a profoundly creative act, involving a slow growth to new life. It may appear passive on the outside, but internally, it consists of never-ending action as new life is knit together in the womb.

This analogy of waiting in pregnancy is, I think, a really helpful one for us as we consider what sort of waiting Advent requires of us. Advent is such a busy time for all of us that the thought of just stopping and sitting passively is simply impossible, attractive though it might seem.

But Advent waiting isn't about passivity but *activity*: the internal activity of our hearts and of our relationships with others and with God that in turn knits together new life within us. Towards the end of our gospel reading today, Jesus is telling his disciples about the devastations and destruction that will befall Jerusalem. He then goes on to assure them that he will come again, an assurance that we proclaim Sunday by Sunday in the *Mysterium Fidei*: the Mystery of faith: "*Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.*" But he tells them that no one, not even the angels in heaven or he himself knows when, but only the Father himself. And so he warns us to beware; to keep alert, for we do not know when the time will come. If we knew that, what would be the point in living lives of readiness? If we knew for example, that he would come at a specific date in the future, beyond the bounds of our own lifespan, how might we choose to live our lives then?

As a brief aside, I recently gave someone a piece of music copied from a large hymn book which had the theme of the hymn, "Christ's promised coming" printed above the hymn number, two thousand and ninety. She read it as "Christ's Promised Coming: 2090" – well if that's true, none of us is likely to be around to see it!

But despite various bizarre claims to the contrary, no one knows the day or the hour as Jesus reminds us. And so we are called to live our lives as those who know that our master will return but not the time; to keep awake; to be prepared; to live our lives in such a way that it doesn't matter when he comes, because we will be ready. In this way, all of life becomes a preparation to meet the king.

Advent, then, is a waiting time. Not an impatient, unproductive waiting like my experience at the airport, but a creative, life-forming waiting as in Paula Gooder's experience of pregnancy. A time in which to wait on the Lord in prayer as we prepare ourselves to meet the risen Lord; a time in which we ask God to re-form us from within, to create us anew in His image.

I'd like to end by sharing some verses with you from Psalm 130 which speak so clearly of the eager expectation that should be our pattern and discipline during this season of Advent:

"I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for him;  
in his word is my hope.  
My soul waits for the Lord,  
more than the night watch for the morning;  
more than the night watch for the morning."

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