

ADVENT IS WAITING – story

The early Christians seem to have believed that the end times and the second coming of Christ were just about to happen. So the New Testament has very few references to future generations—no admonitions to “tell this to your children and your children’s children”. There would very soon be a new heaven and a new earth, so don’t get too attached to this one. The great and terrible and wonderful day of the Lord was just about to happen—Jesus would come again very soon. Just wait!

Hebrew knew about waiting! Their Psalms are about waiting, waiting for the Lord, waiting for the Lord to act. Israel knew it was in it for the long haul—Abraham was promised descendants as numerous as the particles of dust on the earth. The statutes and ordinances of the Torah are for all generations to come. And the Psalmist sings, “My soul shall live for the Lord; my descendants shall serve him; they shall be known as the Lord’s for ever. They shall come and make known to a people yet unborn the saving deeds that he has done.” [Ps. 22: 29-30]

And here we are many generations later. And we’re still waiting. Israel still waits for the Messiah. Christians wait for the Messiah’s second coming. And we all wait for the great and glorious and terrible and wonderful Day of the Lord, the consummation, the fulfilment, the Kingdom of God—whatever it is that is God’s vision for this world.

So, we wait! But how are we to wait? Shall we simply sit here and wait? We could. Some do. But while we’re waiting we might notice that we can do stuff. We can make things happen. Rather than be bored to tears waiting or greatly annoyed by the delay, we can get up and do stuff. While our souls “wait for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning” [Ps. 130] we can be creative, we can be agents of change.

None of us knows exactly what God has in mind for the new heaven and new earth. But I suspect we all have intuitions, even visions of what this new world shall be like—the Hebrew prophets sketch this out a bit: the peaceable kingdom, justice, well-being and provision for all.

“The lion shall eat straw like the ox.” Isaiah’s description of the peaceable kingdom offers us a hope-filled vision of a future world without conflict.

Perhaps it would help to realise that in his New Kingdom that the sheep, the cow are changed as much in their own nature as are the lions and bears. For a deer to lose its timidity is just as radical a change as for a cougar to lose its ferocity. Even John Baptist's vipers will be transformed in the peaceable kingdom! In fact, the entire equation of predator and prey is broken in this new and peaceful world. There are no longer victors and victims, but a new society in which all creatures thrive - a peaceable kingdom full of astonishing abundance, in a landscape "*full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*"

Knowledge of the Lord is dangerous: it is deep and life-changing water. It is in fact baptismal water, water that transforms us and births us into new life.

John the Baptist draws crowds to himself at the Jordan River with the call to repentance and the promise of the kingdom of heaven. He was the prophet for his time preparing the way for people to understand the good news of their salvation. That how God normally works; He sends the message of salvation to us through each other. As St Paul once put it, *how can people know the truth about God if they have never heard it; and how can they hear if nobody is sent to them?*

Jesus found his first disciples among those who were influenced by the preaching of John the Baptist who had showed them the value of self-control and of prayer; he urged them to listen to the inner voice of God, with repentance and a faithful heart. Through him, Andrew and his brother Peter, and Philip and Nathanael became apostles of Jesus.

Christians, committed to their calling as prophets of **our** time, by the example of their own faith and prayer are to help other people to seek the Kingdom.

When looked at in light of today's Gospel, does our way of speaking and behaving in any way help others to share our values, or do we confirm their suspicion that this world is a selfish and cynical place?

John, like Isaiah, heralds the arrival of the Messiah as well as of the kingdom of heaven. John promises one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire..

This holy breath and holy fire may in fact be one and the same substance. John describes how the chaff will be burned with "unquenchable fire,"

while Isaiah tells us that the “breath of his lips” shall slay the wicked. Wind and fire can surely destroy, but they can also stoke the flames of the craftsman’s forge. Just as the Messiah both judges and redeems, the Holy Spirit both consumes and creates.

Advent reflection and repentance calls us to allow ourselves to be shaped into new creatures. As we ponder the earthly arrival of Jesus and prepare ourselves for his coming again in glory, we understand that our Messiah himself has been both a nursing child and a righteous judge. He appears as slain lamb and as mighty king. As holy breath and as roaring fire.

In this new Kingdom, we will enjoy the sweetest intimacy with the Christ we have been waiting for so many generations. An intimacy which requires total transformation – which requires submission. Submission is the bedfellow of humility and repentance – and points to a journey through the flames

William Temple said of this new intimacy:

“It is penitence which creates intimacy with our Lord. No-one can know him intimately who has not realised the sickness of his own soul and obtained healing from the Physician of souls. Our virtues do not bring us near to Christ – the gulf between them and his holiness is unbridgeable. Our pain may give us a taste of fellowship with him, but it is only a taste unless the great creator of intimacy – penitence – is also there.” William Temple

For those of us who are impatient, we want this intimacy now—we do not want any of the fire though, and we do not want to wait. We could sit and pout. Or, while we are all waiting for the mighty acts of God, we could do stuff.

While we are waiting, we can actually bring into being what we are waiting for, what we envisage for the future. God works through human agency to bring about the future. The future Kingdom breaks into the present through our actions, through our work to bring about justice and peace and well-being for all people. So Christian waiting does not need to be passive; Christian waiting can be active, creative—animated by Christ’s love; guided by Christ’s creative wisdom and Spirit.

What about patience? Can active and creative waiting also be patient? I believe so; but it requires some humility. And a healthy dose of

agnosticism! Because we simply don't know what God has in mind for the future. We don't see the grand design of the master weaver.

We may feel called to be agents of change, participating in God's creative work to bring about the new life of the Kingdom. We may accomplish big things, we may do important work. But we actually don't know if, in the scheme of things, these things are important. Or we may feel called to do things that seem small and insignificant. We don't actually know if, in the scheme of things, they are small and insignificant. I suspect that the seemingly small, ordinary kindnesses of our lives are magnified greatly in God's design. We remember the story of the widow's mite and the stories of the loaves and fishes. What seems like little to us may amount to a great deal in God's economy. We do what we can, what we feel called to do, large or small—but the rest is in God's hands.

I suppose this message is fairly straight-forward: Waiting can be active and creative. Patient waiting adds the element of humility: in humility we leave the significance and outcome of what we do up to God. Our restlessness and impatience may very well be promptings of the Spirit to do something—but how this something fits into the larger design is not for us to know, at least not yet.

Patient waiting calls for humility and the willingness to admit how small we are, and how little know about what God has in mind for the future. Patient waiting calls for trust and hope. Yes, we may be movers and shakers. But whether we move and shake a lot or shake and move but a little, we trust God to make what he will of our moving and shaking.