

## **A reflection for the First Sunday of Advent**

Just as he was beginning his career in banking in the early 1970s, a friend of mine recalled his bank launching a new credit card on the popular market with the slogan “Take the waiting out of wanting”. The underlying suggestion seemed to be “Why wait? You’re in control”. That is an idea that seemed very much in tune with the times, and still governs a great deal of the way we behave – especially at this time of the year.

I thought about this as, with 51 days to go, on 4<sup>th</sup> November John Lewis and Marks and Spencer launched their Christmas advertising campaign. BBC News that day reported that “as last Christmas was a washout thanks to Covid, retailers hope we’ll celebrate in style this time”. An executive of one of the stores said “It’s a very big moment. Customers have told us they want a bigger and more magical Christmas than ever this year. And we can see them getting organised earlier than ever, too. Half our customers have said they’re going to have all their presents bought by the end of this month. Can you believe it?” So why wait? You’re in control.

It’s true that waiting is a rather unappealing aspect of modern life. We’re used to immediacy and swift action. We’d quite like to have things when we decide we want them, and so waiting seems negative, passive, unexciting – sitting drumming our fingers - before we get to the exciting culmination.

We might say that these last eighteen months have been a shock to the system. Waiting has become an essential feature of how we’ve had to live our lives; waiting for a vaccine to be researched, developed, tested, approved, and launched; then waiting, sometimes in a queue for our first, second and booster jabs. Waiting for the opportunity to have physical contact with a much-loved person in a care home; waiting for a return to “normal life”, however we define that. Contrary to the credit card slogan, we have had to learn to wait – because we are definitely not “in control.”

Today is the beginning of Advent – the four weeks the church dedicates to waiting with a kind of “double vision” and celebrating a double hope; both the birth of Jesus at Christmas,

and, looking beyond, to his return in fulfilment of God's promise to renew and restore all things. So it's a time we might think of as an "in-between time"; "already" but "not yet".

The Advent theme of waiting runs as a common thread through the Bible. We think of the story of God's people in the Old Testament; the centuries of longing for something that would change everything; longing for an end to captivity, longing to be back home in some sense, longing to be at home with God again, longing for reconciliation.

Something of that is picked up in our first reading today. Jeremiah is speaking to his people who are captives, living the painful experience of exile a thousand miles from home in Babylon. Their world has been shattered: their beloved city, Jerusalem, and the temple are in ruins. They're in despair and apparently without hope.

Yet Jeremiah urges his people to hold on to and trust the promise of God, a promise to bring hope, peace and justice, even though the circumstances seem impossible. Another prophet, Isaiah had put it like this: "No eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him." (Isaiah 64:4)

So during these four weeks before Christmas, that's partly what we are reflecting on. Then Jesus comes into the life of the world with something overwhelming, something that makes the colossal difference the prophets like Jeremiah longed for.

But, as Rowan Williams notes, this is at first sight a bit odd. Surely, as Jesus has come into the world, by now we ought to know what sort of difference he's made? But the truth is that we don't yet know the difference Jesus might make. We know some of the difference he's made to our lives as individuals, to the life of the Christian community, the Church, to the whole world. And yet there's more. We're still waiting to see what might happen if Jesus was allowed into our lives that bit more fully; that bit more radically.

So Advent is a time to stop, take stock and ask some questions of ourselves. Have I allowed Jesus in yet? Has the good news really made the full impact it might make, or have I been lulled into contentment with how things are now? It's a time of repentance, of facing

myself honestly and saying sorry for the things that don't sit easily with the anticipation of the birth of God in our lives. Yet it's a time, too, of expectation and a time of hope.

But then we're suddenly asked to grapple with that extraordinary passage from Luke's gospel. It's a special kind of writing in the Jewish tradition - it's called apocalyptic. It's about the end times. And it probably made the disciples who heard it as uncomfortable as it does us. Earth and sea in uproar, global panic, the threat of doom, the powers quaking. Our immediate reaction to all that might well be to pull the duvet firmly back over our heads.

Whatever else we make of that language about the coming end, we need to avoid, on the one hand, obsessing about it as some Christian traditions do – in spite of Jesus very clearly warning his disciples about that. But on the other hand, we need to avoid the temptation to treat it a bit like an embarrassing relative – always present but best ignored.

The wisest course is surely to focus on Jesus's words. The disciples were told that, when the signs of the end appear, they were to lift their heads, because summer is coming for creation; the kingdom of God is near.

That's a message for us, too. For the Apostle Paul, the significance of Jesus's resurrection was that the end times had already begun, but had not yet come to completion:

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth.....Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8: 22-23.)

Isaiah had earlier painted a picture of how God's world would one day be as one, and where “the wolf will live with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the goat” (Isaiah 11:6). Visions of the end show us how it will be when God brings all things to fulfilment. But we're reminded, too, that we can see glimpses of that end time – glimmers of glory - breaking through in our world now. As one writer describes it:

Every act of justice, every word of truth, every creation of genuine beauty, every act of self-sacrificial love.....the piece of work done honestly, the meal prepared and served with care and consideration at a lunch club; the setting aside of my own longings in order to support

and cherish someone who depends on me .....these [are all signs] that will be reaffirmed on the last day.

Jesus urges us in those verses from Luke to “be on guard.....be alert at all times”. So our waiting should be anything but passive; it must be active, challenging us to bring about more and more of these end time moments. Advent is a time when we are called to reflect on where these moments might lie in our own lives, our own communities and our world.

But finally, I think there’s another aspect of Advent. It’s not just we who wait. God is waiting too. “The Lord waits to be gracious to you” says Isaiah (30:18). I believe the word in Hebrew for “wait” has a stronger meaning than we attach to it; it’s to look with eagerness for something or someone. God waits for our attention, for our “visits home”; God waits for our vision and our ear. God’s being made flesh is not limited to God’s taking on feet and hands and hair. Like the Prodigal Son’s father, God shares this experience of expectancy and anticipation and longing for us.

R S Thomas ends one of his poems, “Kneeling”, with this line: “The meaning is in the waiting”. So Advent is not only about our waiting for God, waiting for God to be born, waiting for God to come back. It’s also a time when we enter God’s waiting. And perhaps that’s where the meaning of waiting gleams most brightly of all.

