



**3<sup>rd</sup> December 2017**  
**Ezekiel 34.11-16, 20-24**  
**Matthew 25.31-end**

## **The Waiting Spectrum**

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*Gracious God – may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning – so touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth – through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen*

'Waiting' isn't popular.

We have become people who tap keyboards and turn on switches expecting instant results.

Sometimes those keyboards need a 'don't send' button, or 'can I get that email back' tab – because instead of waiting to respond to a complaint or criticism, we wade in with a haste we later regret.

We can put the word 'waiting', I think, next to a number of other words and the result conjures up a kaleidoscope of emotions

'Waiting room' maybe fills us with the anxiety of seeing the doctor.

Whilst 'Waiting impatiently' is probably what's now started in millions of households as children anticipate the 25<sup>th</sup>.

In today's lectionary readings Mark writes just after the Fall of Jerusalem in AD70 and, like many of his generation, he speaks of waiting for The Day of The Lord, that second coming of Christ which many in the Early Church believed would happen in their lifetime.

Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, a place where he had lived and ministered for 18 months, urges the congregation to be loving and faithful as they too wait for the Day of Jesus.

There is, I think, a spectrum when it comes to waiting and we have various experiences of it depending where on the spectrum our encounter with 'waiting' sits.

At one end is the sort of waiting that is fulfilled.

In this scenario the waiting seems to have been fruitful and there is a happy, fulfilling result at the end that seems to justify the process we have gone through.

Perhaps we have prayed, and kept on praying – and in the end there has been a change that has gladdened the heart.

I wonder if you saw The Archbishop of York on the Andrew Marr show last weekend?

Ten years ago, on that same programme, he took out some scissors and cut up his clerical collar into pieces. He said he wouldn't wear another collar until Zimbabwe had a new president.

This week Andrew Marr, who had kept the pieces of the Archbishop's collar in his desk draw, gave them back to John Sentamu, who put on a new clerical collar for the first time in a decade.

He had waited, and prayed – and rejoicing in a new beginning for an African country close to his heart – the wait is now over and a new start for Zimbabwe has dawned.

After waiting there can be resolution.

And when that happens perhaps we are glad we didn't rush into a decision and that, instead, we took the 'long view' and just let time take its course.

Simeon and Anna waited. Two old believers who worshipped in the Temple and longed to see God's anointed one. In Jesus they believed they saw God's future – and so after all the waiting Simeon prays: Lord, let now your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.

There are times in all our lives when at the end of many prayers, after years working hard to solve a problem or resolve a personal issue, the waiting and the longing seems to come good and we join with Simeon in looking back with a sense of satisfaction and completion. The wait was worthwhile and we cry Hallelujah.

However, in the middle of the Waiting Spectrum might there be an idea which isn't always so attractive to us, yet it's a process that can be of immense value – the idea that waiting in and of itself can be transformative, that the wait can be good for us.

I have a parable for you this morning – it's one I've made up.

There was this young lad who wanted a trainset – so that rather dates this parable to at least forty years ago before computers!

The loft was ready and empty at home but to fill it with a trainset was too much expense for this family. They never gave extravagant presents as they simply didn't have the money.

So the young lad was promised that Mum and Dad would buy half the set if he could save up his pocket money for a couple of years and buy the other half. Two years of waiting – what a thought for a thirteen-year-old in a hurry.

So he saved his pocket money every week. And every Saturday morning he went around to grandma's and did odd jobs for her. And every week for two years they'd stop halfway through the morning of odd jobs and enjoy half an hour of juice and biscuits together, telling each other stories about their week.

But still the loft remained empty and he waited.

During those two years he read every book there was in the library about steam locomotives, signalling and track specification. He spent hours in his room living in his imagination building that trainset.

But still the loft remained empty and he waited.

He went with his Scout troop to a local Steam Preservation line one day in the holidays. At the end they asked for volunteers and he signed up spending a few days every half term working at the station alongside people who loved what he loved.

But still the loft remained empty and he waited.

After a couple of years there was enough money in the joint kitty for him and his parents to buy the train set and fill the loft with tracks, stations and engines. But he was by now a very different lad with a train set. In his waiting he had got to know his grandma better than ever before. In his waiting he had read so much and used his imagination so creatively. In his waiting he had found friends at the Preservation Society who shared his passion. He set up his track as he loved it perhaps unaware that, in the waiting, he had gained so much along the way

The waiting was good. It was even transformative. And none of it would have happened if, two years ago, he had bought the trainset straight away.

Now I know that parable probably falls down in all sorts of ways – but don't all of us know deep down that we have sometimes learnt most about ourselves, our family, our community and, even our God as we have spent time waiting – because waiting is often good for us, it changes us almost without us noticing.

My last point on this spectrum of waiting is the far end. Up till now we've been thinking of fulfilled waiting but what about the sort that is, in reality open-ended, when perhaps a resolution may never occur.

It's often said, not least by the Catholic theologian Richard Rohr, that one of the keys to life is how we deal with the moments of disillusionment that come our way and how we pick ourselves up after we have fallen.

Jesus must have spent three years waiting – and they were often years of disillusionment. Waiting for the crowds to hear his parables at a deeper level. Waiting for the religious authorities to dialogue instead of threaten him. Waiting for his family to accept rather than dismiss him.

Even in Gethsemane's garden, in all his vulnerability, he prays: Father, if it is your will take this cup of suffering from me. He prays and waits. Yet what he hoped for at midnight is still as illusive at dawn and instead of reconciliation he hears the approaching thud of soldiers marching to arrest him and take him to the gallows.

When do we do in this sort of waiting?

Well maybe this season of Advent can teach us once more about how to wait?

I love Australia but I think if I lived there I would, perversely, miss the early twilight of these December afternoons.

It's the season of gathering darkness. By 4 each day, or as Captain Mainwaring from Dad's Army would say, by 16 hundred hours o'clock, we are turning on the lights.

I remember speaking to a minister colleague in Adelaide and he told me of the winter he and his wife spent in Edinburgh on a Manse exchange and of how they loved walking down Princes Street at Advent. They loved the atmosphere of night drawing in so early and the lights beginning to flicker in the shop windows. They couldn't get enough of it and made that walk every day.

They loved the idea that light can pierce the darkness.

And it's that simple yet profound idea that comes to us every Advent.

In my first church, one that seated a thousand, every carol service began as the Sanctuary lights were turned off. A Sunday School member would strike a single match – and into this huge waiting space a flicker of light would appear lighting one, then four candles.

We could have all gone home without singing a single carol and still we would have received the Advent message of hope. Light can pierce the darkness of waiting.

In today's parable of the fig tree Jesus asks his disciples to look out for the sprouting of the buds. In picture language he is calling them to watchful living. To read what is going on around them and be very conscious of God at work – even as they wait for the Day of the Lord.

God is present in the waiting. As a patient waits for this week's chemotherapy, God is there. As a relative waits for some recognition from a loved one with dementia, God is there. As the people of Zimbabwe wait to see if the promises of a new regime are fulfilled. God is there.

Advent, not just a season of waiting, but of waiting hopefully believing and trusting that light can, and will, pierce the darkness.

May that be your experience as we make our journey to the stable once more this year. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, St Andrew's Day, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2017*