

HOW THEN SHALL WE WAIT?

Jeremiah 33. 14-16
1 Thessalonians 3. 9-13
Luke 21. 25-36

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I'm sure that you'll agree with me that in this day and age, people are generally very reluctant to wait. Waiting means that we lose time; it means that we are hindered from doing other things and are less efficient. We live in a society that doesn't have any time to waste.

One of the world's leading watch manufacturers recently conducted a survey about situations in which people hate to wait, and measured how long the average person will wait in those circumstances before taking action. Here are the waiting times for the top six aggravations:

- A car in front of you at a green light: 50 seconds;
- People who are talking in the cinema: 1 minute, 52 seconds;
- Parents who need to quieten a loud baby: 2 minutes, 41 seconds;
- Waiting in a queue at Starbucks: 7 minutes;
- Waiting at airport security: 28 minutes;
- Waiting at the doctor's office: 32 minutes.

Personally, I think that these statistics need to be revised: just before leaving Paris to come to Guernsey, I had a doctor's appointment, and I had to wait not 32 minutes, but 45; and I didn't even complain.

Today, we are celebrating the First Sunday of Advent; and as we all know, today is not only the first Sunday of the Christian year; it marks the beginning of that period when we look forward to celebrating the incarnation of our Lord. The word “advent” is taken from the Latin word “advenio”, which means “to come to”. In Advent, we *wait in expectation* to celebrate Jesus’ first coming to earth.

Given that this is the case, you might be somewhat surprised by the text that was chosen for our gospel reading this morning. But this choice is intentional: Advent is also a time when we wait in another way, when we look forward to our Lord’s *second* coming to earth.

Our passage describes some of the events and signs that will precede the coming of the Son of Man. Some of these signs will be visible in the heavens above us; and they will trigger events in the nations of the world. Our Lord therefore encourages his disciples (and that includes us) to ‘be alert’ and to ‘pray’; to ‘stand up’ and ‘raise our heads’, because our ‘redemption is drawing near’. Christians are to keep watch; and they are to be expectant.

Before I share some thoughts with you about how we Christians are to wait in Advent, I’d like to say a few words about what it is, or *who* it is, we’re waiting for at the Second Advent. The Greek word that is often used to describe the Second Advent of Christ is ‘parousia’, which is quite appropriate, because it refers to the visitation of a god, or the coming or arrival of a king as he travels about his realm and is greeted by his subjects.

There are two things that we can understand about the ‘parousia’ of Jesus Christ.

The first thing is that it will signify the end of all history. When our Lord came in the First Advent, he inaugurated the kingdom of God; and that kingdom will be

consummated by his return at the end of history. History – our personal history, and the history of the entire world since its beginning – is actually Christ’s story. He was at history’s beginning. He created our world; he came to dwell in it; and he will return at the end of history to wind it all up. This means that history is actually going somewhere. It is not meaningless, nor is it random. It is moving steadily towards that grand day of Jesus’ second coming.

Secondly, the ‘parousia’ of our Lord signifies his return. Yes, I know, this might sound obvious, but when I speak of Jesus’ return to earth, I want to emphasise the fact that he will return to us *personally*. He will return to *you*; and he will return to *me*. This is tremendously significant. This means that when we see our Lord at the end of all history, we shall not be confronted by someone who is alien to us and who does not understand us, but rather by one who has a perfect and intimate understanding of us, because he has shared our very existence and has been under our very skin.

This does, of course, mean that the return of Jesus signifies judgement. As we have seen in Luke 21, the return of our Lord will herald the moment when we must all stand before the Son of Man. But let me reassure you! For those of us who belong to our Lord, his return is *good news*. The return of Christ is a time of triumph: the triumph of good over evil, of God’s purposes over human and satanic rebellion, of God’s will in human hearts, in human society and the natural world.

The return of Christ also spells restoration. When Jesus comes, there will be social, cosmic, personal and moral restoration. There will be a new creation, a ‘new heaven and a new earth’, and as St Peter puts it in one of his epistles, ‘the new home of righteousness’ (2 Pet 3. 13).

We have seen that the return of Christ is the future dimension of his kingdom. It is crucial that we who are citizens of that kingdom be ready to meet our Lord when he comes. How then, shall we wait?

Jesus doesn't call us to wait passively. The way that we live together in the world as kingdom people, as Advent people, is serious business; and it calls for an active faith. Advent invites us to look to the future; but perhaps its most demanding challenges and exciting promises come when we recognise that the *present* is 'kingdom time' as well. Thanks to Christ's First Advent, *our very present can be filled to overflowing with the presence of God*. I wonder, how do we view the present? Or more specifically, how do we view *our* present? Whether we consider the present to be sunny and bright, or fair to partly cloudy, or dismal and gloomy, God has sent the Messiah to come to live in *our present*.

Because of this amazing reality, this reality that Bernard of Clairvaux called the "third advent" – *the fact that Jesus is present with us now, and active in our lives* – we are called to look honestly at the quality of our waiting. Can our waiting for our Lord be described as passive, or active?

Christ's return will be a profoundly good thing, and this means that his coming again need not make us nervous, or sleepless. His return is simply intended to make us faithful. When our Lord tells us in St Luke's gospel to 'be alert' and 'pray', I'm convinced that the alertness he's talking about is not an all-consuming behaviour that prevents us from functioning or being fruitful. Rather, I think that what Jesus is actually referring to is 'waiting with engagement'. As we wait for our Lord, we don't need necessarily to perform heroic acts or spiritual feats; walking faithfully and humbly with our God will do just fine.

You and I are called to carry on with our lives and our routines, in holy watchfulness for Christ's return. Does this mean that faithfulness to our Lord can be demonstrated by being a good teacher, an upright businessman or woman, an ethical lawyer, and a thoughtful wife, husband, and grandparent? Yes, it does. One way that we can live for the future is to live lives of simple faithfulness in the present.

And lest we doubt this, we have only to look at the lives of those who do not share our belief that there is a cosmic Lord named Jesus Christ who will return once again to his people. Both Christians and non-Christians can be said to have very ordinary lives: but the difference about Christians is that their ordinary lives demonstrate a sense of the extraordinary. In the ordinary lives of Christians, there is a recognition of the only One who is truly holy. And Christians' ordinary lives reveal, perhaps more than they know, their hope, which is anchored in, and based on a Person.

As we begin our spiritual journey together in Advent, may those around us – our families, our friends, our neighbours and our colleagues – be able to look at the shape of our lives and say, “Those Christians never give up hope. We can tell.”

Amen.