

WAITING IN ADVENT

Isaiah 2. 1-5

Romans 13. 11-14

Matthew 24. 36-44

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

Today is the First Sunday of Advent; and as we begin our observance of this season which marks the beginning of the Church year, we put ourselves (almost like characters in a play) in the position of the world before Jesus of Nazareth, the world that was crying out for a Messiah, waiting for the coming of God that happened at what we call Christmas. As post-Christmas people, we ourselves are also waiting, waiting for our Lord to return in glory. It's both kinds of waiting at once.

But there are different ways of waiting, aren't there? One of the most well-known depictions of waiting is given in Samuel Beckett's twentieth-century play *Waiting for Godot*. As you may remember the plot features two characters called Vladimir and Estragon, who are, as the title says, waiting for a man named Godot; a man who, to their great consternation, never appears. They receive a few encouraging signs, some assurances that Godot will arrive soon; tomorrow perhaps. But to their mounting distress, he remains a no-show. Even though eventually their patience runs out and they convince each other that they will wait no longer, still they remain, waiting, as if they are simply unable to do differently. The play is both hilariously funny and also one of the most painfully sad works to come out of the last century. It ends with the two characters in the same position that they were in at the very beginning: in many productions, gazing out at the audience, patiently enduring the pain of their unfulfilled need. No progress is made. No one's state has improved. And still they wait, waiting for Godot. 'I can't go on like this', Estragon says. 'That's what you think', Vladimir replies.

If Beckett's depiction of waiting is of one kind, our Christmas waiting may have more in common with an image of another kind of waiting, that described in the Hebrew Scriptures in the beautiful poem known as 'The Song of Songs' or the Song of Solomon. It is, among other things, the story of a bride and groom, coming towards each other from some distance: the groom is drunk with desire for the beloved, and the bride is eager with the anticipation of their union. She says, 'The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.' And he answers, 'You have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes.'¹

Song of Songs, understood allegorically, recounts the story of Israel's waiting for the Lord, and the Lord's rushing towards Israel. Like the bride, the world waits with longing for the consummation of all things. This story of the coming Kingdom of God is what we will hear foretold in our Advent readings by the prophets; by John the Baptist; by Christ; and by Paul. 'The night is far gone, the day is near', says Paul in today's reading from the epistle to the Romans.

The coming of the Messiah, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, it is *this* that heralds the new kingdom, which is already here but is not yet fully accomplished. Christmas is the initiation of this new kingdom; it is its beginning. Unlike Vladimir and Estragon, we have the Incarnation to attest to the fact that the wedding day has already arrived; and we now are waiting only the commencement of the festivities.

However there is another difference between our season of Advent and the waiting of Vladimir and Estragon. When the curtain falls at the end of Beckett's play, little has changed in the lives of the protagonists. In addition to being futile, their waiting was static as well. Hopefully not so with us: our time of Advent waiting (in both the short- and long-term senses) is also a time of preparation.

¹ Song of Solomon 2, 8, 4, 9.

We can prepare ourselves for the arrival of the Messiah, and that involves changing our lives and changing our stories. Our waiting is an *active* waiting. We don't remain frozen in some earlier version of ourselves; the last word about us has not yet been spoken. There is time, even if we don't know how much; there is time to change the narrative of our lives so that, at that last day, we can rejoice and not fear.

The Roman Catholic priest and theologian James Alison gives this example: think about the story of Cain and Abel. They were two brothers and the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain was a farmer, Abel a shepherd, and in a fit of jealousy one day Cain took Abel out into his fields, and killed him. And God comes to Cain and says, 'Where is your brother Abel?' and Cain answers, 'Am I my brother's keeper?'² And for this murder Cain is cursed and driven out of the land and made to wander the earth as a fugitive.

But (Alison asks) what if, much later, Abel was raised from the dead, to come and confront his brother, the brother who had killed him? And Alison says that the time between Abel's death and Abel's return would be a time of opportunity for Cain to change the direction of his story. Years later (however many: 20? 30? 40?) Cain no longer has to be defined only as a murderer. 'Yes, I did that horrible thing', perhaps he could say. 'I can never undo that. But in the last years I have changed my life. Through prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I have constructed a new life, a new story, so that I can now look in the mirror and say: yes, this is a man who killed his brother; and this is also a man who has since then dedicated his life to works of mercy and love; who has not been static, who has repented and turned towards God and peace. The years have passed; the story has grown and changed; and the man has grown and changed, too.'

² Cf. Gen 4. 9.

Were that to happen, the interval of years in Cain's life would have been a time of grace; a time of not just passively waiting, but a time of preparation. An opportunity to not be condemned by one's past, but to construct new directions for our stories.

So it is entirely appropriate to ask this question during Advent: what is our story going to be, on that day of the coming of Jesus Christ? We know what our story is today. Perhaps we, like Cain, have things in our lives that plague our wanderings and suffocate our days. But there is time to change. There is this time of grace. Whereas Beckett's waiting was a waiting without hope that anything can change for the better; Advent waiting is the active turning away from sin, from greed and from evil. You and I are invited to repent now, so we can greet our coming Saviour with joy then.

Because, also unlike Beckett's seemingly indifferent Godot, the God who approaches us does so like the groom who is drunk with love: he is eager to forgive us and happy to receive us, even in our betrayal. Our God is the groom who will do anything to accomplish the marriage, even death itself. This is the story of Israel and this is the story of the Gospel: we are pursued by the one who loved us before we even knew that we were lovable.

We hold onto this hope and this faith, that we are the objects of a greater love than the world has ever seen, one greater than we can understand. We worship a God who is utterly besotted with desire for us, like a groom rushing toward his bride. But the groom comes at night, in the darkness, perhaps just at that moment when we have given up hope that his arrival is even possible.

In Beckett's play Estragon asks, 'And if he comes?' And Vladimir answers, 'We'll be saved.'

Estragon and Vladimir are still waiting, and so are we; but *we wait in hope.* Amen.