

Waiting and preparing

A sermon preached by the Rev'd Dr Mark Butchers at St Peter's, Wolvercote on the second Sunday in Advent, 9th December 2007

Advent is the season of waiting and preparing. There are two things we are waiting and preparing for. Firstly, and most immediately, we are waiting and preparing for this particular Christmas - to enter into the events of 2000 years ago once more, to celebrate and give thanks for the birth of Christ. In doing so, we renew our commitment to God incarnate in Christ.

Secondly, we are waiting and preparing for the coming of the Kingdom, for God's fulfilment of us and his creation, for the perfecting of who we are and all that is. The very purpose of our existence on earth is to ready ourselves for that ultimate meeting with our Creator at our death, when the Kingdom will become a full reality for us. Hence each Advent is a symbol of that lifelong preparation to meet God.

Waiting and preparing are inseparable, totally interwoven; and yet they are distinct, two sides of the same coin. To illustrate the difference between them, imagine the experience of having a baby. There are many things you can do to prepare for the birth: buying the right equipment, keeping healthy, making the necessary practical and financial adjustments, even some of the mental and emotional ones. This is *active preparation*.

But there's also a lot which is out of your control: you can't hurry a pregnancy, you can't determine the intelligence or looks of your baby (not yet at least); you can't usually dictate the day and time of the birth. All these things you can only wait for patiently or impatiently. That is *passive waiting*. In every event we look forward to, we will experience both active preparation and passive waiting. Both are involved in Advent. Both are important for us as we look towards not just this Christmas, but also our ultimate meeting with God.

I want to suggest that preparing and waiting each finds a symbolic representation in one of the key Biblical figures of Advent. The symbol of active preparation for me is John the Baptist, going out into the wilderness, preaching repentance and baptising those who responded. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths". The symbol of passive waiting is the Blessed Virgin Mary, waiting on God, waiting for the birth of Jesus, responding not initiating. "Be it unto me according to your Word". Now I know that in reality John and Mary would *both* have waited on God and would *both* have prepared the way for the coming of Christ. But the Gospel accounts allow us, I think, to characterise them in this way: one representing waiting, the other preparing: two sides of the same coin, two interwoven aspects of the human response to God.

In a short sermon I haven't time to reflect on both waiting and preparing, so I have chosen to focus on waiting. I've done so for two reasons. One is the practical reason that I think we are more familiar with preparation and more comfortable with it. We like to be busy and active; we like to do things to get ready. Whereas waiting is more difficult.

But the other reason is a theological one. It's bound up with the issue of who actually brings the Kingdom about - God or us. Sometimes Christians have thought that human effort can build the Kingdom. This was especially true in the late 19th century. People believed that by promoting good liberal values of education, healthcare and welfare, they could gradually improve society until it became God's Kingdom. A noble vision, but one which ultimately fails as all purely human effort will. For God is squeezed out. The

emphasis is diverted from God's initiative to which we respond, to human action alone. The balance between waiting on God and active preparation gets skewed too much towards the latter. That is a constant temptation for humanity and why we need to be reminded of our need to wait on God. So for both those reasons, I'm going to focus on waiting.

Ordinary waiting - the sort we do every day in queues, or for a letter, or for someone to do something - is not always easy. Sometimes it can be acutely emotionally painful. Waiting in a hospital, either as a patient or as a relative, can make us frustrated, angry, and very vulnerable. We're dependent on others and everything feels out of our control. We don't like that.

The great human illusion is that we *are* in control and can rival God. It's an illusion captured so well in the stories of the Garden of Eden and the tower of Babel; and it's stronger than ever in our modern scientific age. When we're forced to wait in a hospital setting or wherever, that illusion is shattered. We come face to face with the fact that we are not in control, rather that we are weak and vulnerable creatures. We see our fragility, our finitude; we know then we are not God. No wonder we avoid waiting in our ordinary lives, rushing around in frantic activity.

There is, though, another kind of waiting: a spiritual waiting on God. The sort of waiting Isaiah talks about in chapter 40: "those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength and rise up with wings like eagles". This I think is what the Blessed Virgin Mary represents for us. It is a waiting which begins with the acknowledgement of God's majesty and our smallness before him: "My soul magnifies the Lord". It is marked by an awareness of our dependence upon him: "He who is mighty has done great things for me". It moves towards a letting go of our desire to control and a readiness to offer ourselves fully in his service. And it culminates in an acceptance of his will for us: "Be it unto me according to your word".

This kind of waiting is not draining, but strengthening. It builds us up. It renews our strength and our faith. And often it can transform negative experiences of waiting in hospital or wherever - not by removing the frustration, anger and pain, but by providing a wider context in which to set them: the knowledge that no matter what happens to us, God will raise us up on wings like eagles.

Yet this positive spiritual waiting on God is so easily overlooked or avoided. Sometimes we're scared by it. Usually we feel we just haven't got time to do it. We don't follow Martin Luther's example who once said, "I've got so much to do today that I'll have to spend an extra hour in prayer". It just doesn't become a priority for us.

In the end, there's no way of avoiding the fact that waiting on God is a practical discipline. It doesn't just happen; we have to choose to do it, and seek opportunities to do it. The discipline is making ourselves stop and stare, making ourselves waste time with God, stilling ourselves enough to know that he is God. Ideally this should be on a regular basis, but really as and when we can. The Advent Quiet afternoon/evening later today is a chance to do that - just to drop in for half an hour to be still, wait on God, and focus on what we're preparing for.

Or, if you can't do that, then why not take Mary's words in the Magnificat I've already quoted and reflect upon them at home?

"My soul magnifies the Lord"

"He who is mighty has done great things for me"

"Be it unto me according to your word".

Waiting on God is a discipline and a commitment, certainly. But what it leads into is an attitude, or an outlook on life, in which we acknowledge our need of God and our dependence on him. We let go of complete control, place ourselves in his hands and accept his will for us. That's not easy at all, and as I know within myself, so much pulls us in the other direction. But perhaps in this Advent season, we could look to the example of Mary waiting on God. Perhaps we could carve out a few moments when we stop and stare, waste time with our Creator, wait upon him and the coming of his Kingdom. I'm convinced that if we do, we'll be enriched and strengthened, and of course, far better prepared for Christmas. Amen.