

A SERMON FOR ADVENT SUNDAY

***Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen.
Luke 21.36***

The season of Advent, unlike any other season in the Church's year, involves us in a waiting mode of being. I overheard a child in Waitrose the other day saying to her brother "I can't wait for Christmas!". In her eyes I could glimpse how children are caught up in the excitement of waiting. It's a wonderful, suspenseful kind of waiting, and a prolonged wait, peppered for the child with all kinds of promise.

But for adults waiting is often a much less ecstatic business. When I think about waiting my mind turns to hospitals. Patients start the day waiting for early breakfasts, for the bed to be made and for the doctor to come on his rounds. They wait for the result of tests and appointments and surgery or to be sent home; some even await their own death. One of the great theological books written on the theme of waiting is Bill Vanstone's *The Stature of Waiting*. In it Jesus is seen above all else as one who waits; most clearly seen in the Garden of Gethsemane as one who waits and holds on with all the fearfulness and the terror of his own position in the waiting. He is waiting in the midst of his own vulnerability and exposure and helplessness. When I think of Jesus, I think of him waiting, of him trusting, of being thus open and vulnerable and exposed.

Christians do not wait in a vacuum. We wait in time. God's *kairos* time. "And time will have its fancy" says the poet Auden "tomorrow or today". But as time goes by we experience some of the greatest challenges to our sense of who we are, expressed in this morning's Gospel in the order to 'pray at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen'. I think we would not like to know what might happen, yet we must face the possibility that we might be severely tested in the meantime.

I have just got back from a few days with my family. As time goes by, I value these family get-togethers more and more. We are none of us getting any younger and at this particular time it has been important to support my parents, whose health is very frail. We spend a good deal of time talking about the past, as family gatherings are wont to do, but there is the inevitable sense of family concern turning to the health of the older generation. Even though that is barely expressed it is as clear as day. The writer of Ecclesiastes (3.1) reminds us that "there is a time for everything under the sun" and the Season of Advent exposes us to what is in relation to what is to come. But even though the passing of time brings new challenges, some of them emotionally trying, we are urged not to be afraid. Praying for strength to survive is seen as an act of human survival itself. Spiritual awakening and re-awakening is a mark of the Christian

character. It echoes St Paul's definition is of that faith which will outlast the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' (William Shakespeare) and which "...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things". (1 Corinthians 13.7-8).

As the Advent Season begins we are bidden to make a journey from darkness to the light in which Jesus is born in Bethlehem. This light is the end point of our longing, for it is the light which brings God to us in human form, Jesus Christ. We are led to this light by the wisdom of the prophets, the message of an angel and the guiding of a star. But that is for later... For now the Holy Season of Advent points to the hard fact of patient waiting; the waiting in faith while something greater is being unfolded. Waiting in God's time.

In an age in which a vast amount of choice is available to us. In an age in which temporary gratification is satisfied in so many ways and in an age in which communication is instantaneous and abbreviated we are too often urged to live our lives without the inconvenience of waiting. This can lead to a numbing of the senses, and is in spiritual terms, self-depriving. Advent invites us to inhabit brief periods of protracted and sustained silence and find there in the words of Meister Eckhart that sense of God which sustains:

"Nothing is so like God as silence".

Advent speaks to us of the gradual unfolding of the divine disclosure as this morning one of our congregation lights the first candle on the Advent wreath. This is a small but vivid marking of that time which will lead us back to God through the birth at Bethlehem. But first we must wait. So, then let us wait; and let us pray; let us wait, and then let us see...

Because of his visitation, we may no longer desire God as if he were lacking: our redemption is no longer a question of pursuit but of surrender to him who is always and everywhere present. Therefore at every moment we pray that, following him, we may depart from anxiety into his presence. W H Auden.

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