

27th November 2016

Waiting: Ancestors in Faith, called to wait

Genesis 15.1-6; Matthew 24.36-44

Kneeling by R. S. Thomas

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun's light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.
Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

R. S. Thomas

Advent Sunday marks the start of a new Christian Year and reminds us that whilst we prepare to celebrate the first coming of Jesus we still await the return and the second coming of Christ.

A photo was on social media the day after Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election. It said 'Jesus is coming: please Lord Come now!'

Despite those pleas our reading from the New testament has Jesus encouraging his followers to keep watch and be ready because they do not know when the Son of Man will return.

As we count the days to Christmas and open our advent calendar doors we take part in the discipline of waiting. Black Friday reminds us that today we are encouraged to take the waiting out of wanting, cut to the chase and get what we want right away as though there is nothing worth waiting for. 'Why wait?' is the underlying message of so many adverts. Improvements in communications only erode the notion of waiting even further: we are told that people feel aggrieved if they wait for more than 24 hours to receive a reply to an email and mobile phones help us to always be available even when we are out or in another meeting – or even in church. waiting is an increasingly

strange notion. We have become accustomed to immediacy and swift action.

Advent is therefore ridiculous. Four weeks dedicated to waiting. Just like the church it seems irrelevant to our contemporary society. Most people are fed up with Christmas come the 25th December. Just when the church starts to celebrate 12 days of Christmas the rest of the world is moving on to sales and summer holidays. I was in a supermarket in September and noticed a box of mince pies with a consume by date of October. Not only were we to buy our mince pies early we were to eat them early too.

Advent reminds us that waiting is an important spiritual discipline and that is going to be our theme over these next few weeks. Waiting in Advent is about a waiting that rests not in frustration, but in stillness; not in frenzied anticipation but in an embracing of the moment. If we want to appreciate Advent fully we need to relearn how to wait, to rediscover the art of savouring the future, of staying in the present and of finding meaning in the act of waiting.

The meaning is in the waiting. That phrase comes from the poem we just heard - a poem by the 20th century Welsh poet priest R S Thomas. For R S Thomas, faith was never easy, but he dedicatedly followed his pilgrim walk with

God. In one of his best known and loved poems, [Kneeling](#), we find R S Thomas possessed by a great calm, waiting in a stone church before the wooden altar, bathed, haloed, in a summer light, thronged by the spirits waiting, like him, for the message. But because there is a mystery in God which no finite being can fully comprehend, the message even though it comes from God, will lose something in its transmission. So, although R S Thomas knows, as we all do, that words must be found in the end to convey the message, the poet wants to remain for a while in that waiting time, meaning soaking into him in the calm which pervades the stone church. There is a message but something is lost in the telling. Perhaps poetic words are the closest we can get to conveying in words the mystery of the God who loves, but is greater than we can fully understand.ⁱ

We may find ourselves waiting for all sorts of things. Waiting for test results. Waiting for a better job. Waiting for a new relationship. Waiting for retirement. Waiting to get well. Waiting to get acknowledged and affirmed. Waiting for death to come. Those periods of waiting can be frustrating, but they can also offer us the time to draw closer to the mystery of God and find new meaning in the waiting.

The loss of the ability to wait often brings with it the inability to be fully and joyfully present now. Instead we are constantly looking backwards to better times we used to know and forwards to better times that we hope are coming. The more we do this the more we miss the present. Not only that, but it becomes hard to appreciate the future moment when it does come.

Advent offers us the time to hone our skills of being joyfully and fully present now. R S Thomas poem articulates the fact that sometimes the really profound moments of our lives occur 'in between' at the moment just before something happens. The paradox is that sometimes the fulfilment of that for which we wait, robs us of what we were waiting for and that we discover to our surprise that the meaning is in the waiting and not in the fulfilment.

During Advent, the church traditionally remembers the story of salvation history. How God has acted in the past, prompting reflections on how God is working in the present and how God will act in the future. Like a snowball that you start rolling at the top of the hill as it goes down the hill it gets bigger but essentially the same snowball, so as we will see over these weeks of advent we remember the past and a God who creates and recreates. A God who calls and saves, a God who liberates and brings

new life, over and over again. But we often have to train ourselves to recognize God at work.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning summed this up in her poem 'AURORA Leigh':

Earth's crammed with heaven,

And every common bush afire with God;

But only he who sees, takes off his shoes –

The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.

It seems a natural part of being human that we are more predisposed to sit around and pluck blackberries (or the modern day equivalent) than to perceive the presence of God, take off our shoes and worship.

Despite our best intentions, shimmers of divine presence are overlooked or misinterpreted. We see something that proclaims God's presence in our midst but fail to recognize it for what it is. Part of the purpose of telling and retelling the history of salvation and reminding ourselves of the Christmas story is to train us to recognize what it looks like, so that when it happens we not only notice but understand what it is.

In Advent, we wait for something that has happened but also wait for something that will happen again and again. It is this certainty that underpins the New Testament concept of hope. In current speech, hope is a vague optimistic feeling: 'I hope I'll see you tomorrow'. For the biblical writers, hope carries with it a sense of certainty. A confidence that God has acted in the past and will act in the future.

The first Sunday in Advent the readings start by looking at the ancestors of faith. Our Old Testament reading recalls the story of Abraham and how God called him to be the father of faith. In Genesis chapter 12 God called him to leave everything that he knew and loved and go somewhere that he knew nothing about and when he got there God would tell him what would happen next. He would be blessed and be a blessing. No wonder Abraham is an example of faith. We have just been looking at Paul's letter to the Romans and Paul cites Abraham as the archetype of faith. Trusting God even though he hoped against hope.

The word of God was to 'go'. Journey outwards from all that he knows and so leave behind and go somewhere else. It stands in contrast to Jesus call to his disciples to 'come, follow me'. The word used in God's command to Abram is the word that can also be used to come. It depends on

where you are standing. If you are with a person, the command is to go. But if you stand a way off and call them the command is to come. With God, the command is both to go and to come. The 'go' element involves leaving many things; the command to 'come' involves knowing God will accompany us on the journey. Within Christian circles, the technical word 'vocation' has come to mean a specific call (at a certain time in one's life) to a very specific task. This can obscure the fact that God is always calling us and that part of the nature of God's call is this double calling to go and to come; leave behind and to accompany God on the way.

With Abram, God's call was certainly to a lifetime of accompanying God and trusting God for the future. His call is a call to waiting. Abram is promised great things but he doesn't really see the fruits of his promise in his lifetime. He does not see the nation of God's people that grows up to be the Jews. He does not see how from his line Jesus will come to bring blessing to all of humanity. He does not see how he will be known as the father of faith. There are seeds. He is shown the land that will belong to his descendants and after much heartache he does have a son through whom the line is preserved but these seeds remain just that seeds, until his death. God

called him to waiting in hope, even for things that were not fulfilled in his lifetime.

God's call to us remains a call to change: to leaving and accompanying, to moving and changing, to growing and flourishing. It is part of human nature to yearn for stability, to put down roots and stay put; but it is also a rule of nature that things that do not move do not live. Water that does not move becomes stagnant and in the same way when we do not move we become sluggish and hard to change. God's call does not necessarily ask us to move our physical surroundings (although sometimes it does); most often it asks us to move our internal surroundings, to be prepared to be changed and transformed. All that takes time. The meaning is in the waiting.

By chapter 15 of Genesis Abraham has become frustrated with waiting for the promise of having children and his wife Sarah has made him sleep with her servant Hagar. Abraham will be a father but not with his wife. God appears to Abraham and tells him not to be afraid. The command not to be afraid comes with astonishing regularity in the scriptures and is entirely a natural response to the presence of God. God is holy and

mysterious and fear is often the only emotion possible. Often within Christian tradition fear has replaced intimacy with God. We stand off, become reserved and cautious in our faith, not sure of how to live in faith. The paradox of God's relationship with us is that it contains love and danger, intimacy and fear. God loves us with an all embracing deep and passionate love: a love as warming as fire ... and as dangerous.

God reminds Abraham that He is his shield and that his rewards will be great. Alongside the image of God as a dangerous presence runs the image of God as protector; the one who will shield his people from harm. This image does not promise that no harm will happen; shields do not prevent wars but they do protect a soldier from arrows.

Another reason that Abraham need not fear is because his reward will come and it be enormous. Abram's response reveals that perhaps he too struggles with waiting. His response runs along the lines of 'that's all very well but I can't see what you can do because I have no children so I got my servant pregnant'. He thought it was impossible for God to do anything to change the situation and assumed because nothing had changed nothing would change.

What is interesting is that Abram only responds to the last thing God says about the reward.. He skips over God's

promise of company, support and refuge in the present and focuses on what might be coming to him in the future. Abram finds himself caught between what was and what will be and seems unable to rest in confidence with the God who is.

God continues to speak to us in the same way: ‘Do not be afraid, I am your refuge’, and yearns that we may stay a while with the God ‘who is’ rather than rushing after a future reward, however great it may be. Waiting draws us into a different way of being that does not rush to easy answers – which often have complex consequences – but takes account of not just our own welfare but that of all those around us. Waiting involves seeing differently and recognizing that quick answers are not always the best ones.

The story of Abram is a story of waiting. Abraham’s descendants are not yet multitudes, as many as the stars in the sky. Following episodes in scripture show how when they become multitudes they become slaves in Egypt and then the question becomes can God make them a great nation rather than a downtrodden one. Throughout the bible story we discover a God who stands by and pleads

ⁱ Alison Goodlad, <https://www.bmsworldmission.org/engagecatalyst/mission-catalyst-mystery/r-s-thomas-and-the-empty-church>

with his people to stop and realize that the goal is not in fact the most important one. Much more important than the goal is the presence of God; walking with us on the way and helping us realize that waiting can be as important as achieving.

Abraham and Sarah become symbols for us not only of faith but also of waiting;

of waiting as an essential part of our journey with God;
of waiting being vital for the proper unfolding of God’s plan

and of waiting as being as important a that for which we wait.

God summons us to go out but does not always tell us where to, or why.... For that we must wait but in the waiting, we can, sometimes, discover a meaning.