

Advent Sunday 2011

**27 November
Church of the Ascension, Hilton**

**Isaiah 63:16 to 64:8
1 Corinthians 1: 3-9
Mark 13: 32-37**

If patience is a virtue, it's not one of my virtues!

Yet today as we enter Advent Season, patience is again called for. This season leading up to Christmas is one focussed on waiting for the coming of God into the world. It is often described as a time of hope ... and also of “not yet”.

It is the lead-in to the time when we celebrate the birth of Christ – but like all birthdays, Christmas doesn't arrive out of nowhere, full of parties and presents. We wait a whole year for it to come around again. And as we do so, we wait with the people of the biblical story, the people of Israel, waiting for their Messiah to come, and we wait with Mary whose 9 long months of pregnancy were nearing an end. This is the season when we join with the prophet Isaiah who cried out, "If only, LORD; if only you would rip the sky open and come on down!"

One of the most successful advertising slogans ever, was one so well-known now you'd think there never was a time when it was NOT used: "Take home now, pay later." It defines present lifestyles so well. We simply do not like to wait. But then, I've not told you anything you don't already know! We have heard the term “instant gratification society” so many times we're bored hearing it again.

But think about it: Entertainment comes in convenient 30-minute slots at the click of a remote control, “fast food” has fattened us, and we get everywhere quickly because we drive instead of walking. Our economic system based on the false promise of “buy now, pay later” has caused the world to be up to its eyeballs in debt.

BTW – it's not just the Greeks, and I've tired of people addressing me as if somehow I am personally responsible, asking me “what's going on there, Nic?” as if Papandreou and I were mates who were together in Athens last week. What I'd really like to do is to wear a T-shirt that says, “Help me – I'm Greek and I ALSO need a bailout” ☺

But this world is the one in which I live, and most of the time, I live in it quite comfortably. So that struggle is also mine. We seldom use a slow-cooker, don't grow all our veggies and I usually drive places even if I could walk.

But it is deeper than that. People who are lonely and desperately hoping to find someone to share their lives with are forced to live in a time of waiting.

People who hope to have a child but are unable to conceive or have not found a partner to share this with, wait – often painfully.

Those who are sick wait to feel better, to move out of their depression, to be able to move without pain.

Those who have had relationships break down or whose relationships are marked by awful tension or violence or lack of communication are waiting for something to change; waiting for reconciliation; or waiting for the courage to leave; or simply the wisdom to know what to do.

Some are plagued by the feeling they are meant for something different than the job they have today. Some feel they have potential that they cannot find a way to fulfil. Many of us have a vision for the world – a vision of no more poverty, injustice and war and some have prayed for these things for years. And yet – here we are. Have we even made any progress? Where is God and what is God doing? When will we see the things we hope for?

In today's reading from Isaiah we hear the prophet join with us in our hopeful yet painful wait: "If only, LORD; if only you would rip the sky open and come on down!" Together we wait.

But as much as we seem to struggle with waiting for anything, deep inside our spirits it seems that we know more than we realise about the goodness of waiting. It still takes 9 months to grow a baby. Old wine is still finer than new wine. Those of us who have made terrible, stupid mistakes in life know that wisdom is not gained quickly or easily but is discovered over time through the sometimes messy episodes of life.

Like us, the people of the New Testament churches lived in the tension of the wait. Jesus had lived among them. He had authored their faith and promised to return. He had come, yet there was still more to wait for. He had been with them, yet they were still waiting for him.

In today's gospel reading we find a people impatient – as we are – for God to once again "rip the sky open and come down!" The people of Mark's community struggle in their wait for their Saviour to come back. When will he come? What will it be like?

The biblical answer gives us our cue to advent waiting: people of faith are NOT marked by quick answers to prayer or special knowledge about future events. People of faith are marked by the way in which we wait.

The message from today's gospel passage is to not wait passively but to use this time to get ready, to live rightly, to be active in bringing about God's vision of what the world could be like, rather than waiting for God to do it alone.

I want to read to you this anonymous piece about a movie from some years ago, "Groundhog Day" – a particular day in American calendars. Although not put out by Hollywood as a faith-based movie, it has been described as "a modern theological classic".

The central character is Phil, a rude, self-centred weatherman who finds himself in a bizarre time warp, re-living the same day over and over again. He wakes up each day and hears exactly the same idle talk on the radio, has the same meaningless interactions and the same arguments with his colleagues.

For those watching, the sense that Phil is getting nowhere at all is excruciating. And while he is literally living the same day over and over, it's easy to see his predicament as a metaphor for our life, for the sense we often have of a lack of progress, and of repetition and waiting for change. For us, there are times in life, and in faith, and in the history of the world where it feels like Groundhog Day. We make the same mistakes over and over. We live the same routine over and over. We long to have greater faith or more experience of God. We go to church – over and over. We wait.

At the beginning of the film, Phil responds to his predicament with contempt and anger, and then turns to frivolity, and eventually to despair – responses to which we are tempted also. But over time he starts to consider the possibility that he might change, even if the days are all the same. In true Hollywood style, the ending for Phil is that he becomes the kind of man that the object of his affections could fall in love with.

Hollywood ending aside, it offers a message which could be seen as this: what can seem like the meaningless marching on of time, what can seem like the same thing over and over, can be part of God's work of redemption.

Sometimes, the prolonging of history – the time we are given which can be seen as too much time, too much waiting – can be a gift that allows us to become aware of God's purposes. Our task in the season of "not yet" is to become more of who we were created to be and to join with Mark's New Testament friends and "get ready".

Today's Gospel passage from Mark is not intended to inspire a debate about how many hurricanes constitute the end times" or how many wars indicate that the apocalypse is near. Its message is very different: Living as people of faith is as much about how we live in-between huge events and great moments as it is about the great events and celebrations of faith. Christian faith is seen as much in Advent as it is in Christmas, because it is here that we can demonstrate to a world which struggles with the "not yet" that people of faith wait differently.

Advent waiting is different from hopeless, passive waiting. We cry out with Isaiah, "If only, LORD; if only you would rip the sky open and come down!" but we do so knowing that God has and will "come on down". We wait with hope and with purpose.

Advent: The season of "not yet"

In Advent, we refuse to jump straight to Christmas and to take for granted the presence of God. We wait to discern more carefully the One for whom we wait, and the One who waits for us.

Waiting here and now is not so different from waiting in Bethlehem except that we have already received a part of the great gift of God-with-us. We already know something of the story of Jesus – the unique one who came to tell us that it is reasonable and worthwhile to hope and to expect God's vision of the world to come to be. Jesus has come but we are also still waiting for his coming. We have seen God – but God is still hidden from us so much of the time.

We wait for Christmas – because we have a sense – even if it is only a small sense – of what it might mean for God to be here among us in the fullest, closest way. And because the Messiah who came to Bethlehem did not look anything like the world was expecting, we learn during Advent and Christmas to wait for all those things we long for, with the humbling understanding that the perfect gifts of God – the things we are really longing for, sometimes without even knowing it, may not look anything like those things we think we are hoping for.

And so during the season of 'not yet' we join with Isaiah and the New Testament church in crying out, "O Lord, rip the sky open and come down!" In slightly different words we pray what is known throughout the church as the Advent Prayer: "Come Lord Jesus."