

Reflection on the readings – Paul Martin

A friend of mine was a keen supporter of Wigan Rugby league and I remember him telling me that he'd gone to an evening away match and part way through the game, the floodlights failed and they were cast in darkness – it was probably Leigh or somewhere in Yorkshire.

The announcement came over the pa system that they hoped to get the lights back on and encouraged the spectators on this cold wet night to wait patiently. On the pitch, the players huddled around, hands on hips, waiting for the action to recommence. It was a time when Wigan were going through a bad patch and had lost a series of games on the trot. After a few minutes, still in the semi-darkness, one of the Wigan fans shouted to the Wigan players on the pitch: "Come on lads, don't just stand around. Practice!"

Today is Advent Sunday. If I trawl through my considerable back catalogue of Advent Sermons, few of which have aged well, there are frequent references to waiting, or more particularly, the fact that waiting time can be wasted time.

Traditionally, Advent has two themes. Firstly, acknowledging the waiting for the second coming of Christ, but more commonly now, waiting for the advent – the coming of Jesus as a baby. It's an opportunity to prepare for the momentous event of God appearing in human form; a reminder of the huge significance of the incarnation. A spiritual "getting ready" for Christmas.

Advent is then a waiting time. But what sort of waiting time? Is it like the Wigan players standing around hands of hips and doing nothing?

Some of you may well be thinking, "We've almost had a year of waiting". During the first lockdown we were waiting for it to be over. I mistakenly thought, back in March, that the time would come sometime in summer when we would simply be back to normal. How wrong I was – but I wasn't on my own. Donald Trump said it would be over by Easter – I suppose he or his lawyers would point out he didn't say which Easter.

It's been a year of waiting. Waiting for government pronouncements, waiting to see friends and family, waiting to go shopping, waiting to get your hair cut, waiting and still waiting to go to the dentist, waiting to go on holiday, waiting for a vaccine, waiting to go to church.

Some of the waiting has been relatively minor and even trivial – for those of us not on our own and with well-stocked larders. But some of the waiting has been heart-wrenching and painful; relatives desperately waiting to be able to see a family member in hospital, and the waiting has been ended by the death of that relative.

Turning to our Bible readings today, the prophet Isaiah found himself in a painful place. We might say that he was beyond waiting. To fully understand this passage you need to know something about its context. In the previous chapter, 63, we find these verses: 'Look down from heaven and see, from your lofty throne, holy and glorious. Where are your zeal and your might? Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us.' Withheld from us. Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us. God has gone away, gone missing. So again, in today's passage (ch 64, v 7). No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins.

The significant thing about Isaiah is that he is not going to wait patiently. He's going to badger God. Even though he believes God has turned away, even though he thinks that for what he accepts to be a good reason, God is punishing people by his absence, Isaiah has the daring and even the audacity to ask God. He does not stand around, idly waiting for something to happen, he calls upon God for help. (64:1) "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down..."

This is active, almost aggressive waiting. What have we been like over the past few months? How fervently have we prayed for God's action and intervention, for God's support and the strength of the Spirit? There's a virtue in keeping calm and carrying on. But I would say there's a greater virtue in fervent prayer and active discipleship.

I've been deeply moved by the active waiting I've seen over the past few months.

- When we couldn't get to church, ministers, local preachers, readers, musicians, worship leaders got to grips with Zoom and other forms of technology so that worship could continue on line. A host of techy people stepped up and made it possible for services to be posted on YouTube, or recorded to DVD.
- But at the same time, I fear there will have been those who have said, "Well there's nothing we can do until it's over". I would call that passive waiting.
- Other forms of active waiting. Pastoral care. I have heard so many moving stories of regular telephone calls, socially distanced visits over the garden gate, emails, cards, letters, newsletters and such like delivered to people. I spoke to a person from one church and she's not been able to get out for years so the past year has not been hugely different for her; but she said to me, "I've never heard so much from people at church".
- Sadly, there are those who previously did things who seem to have gone quiet – who seem to be waiting for it all to be over until they do anything but thankfully, they are in a minority.

There is active waiting and passive waiting. I've been greatly impressed by the majority of folk in our churches who have done so much in spite of limitations. And I've been a tad disappointed by those who seem to take the view that if we aren't meeting in a building on a Sunday morning, singing hymns and pretending to listen to a sermon, then we aren't properly being church. Some argue we've been a better church over the past few months.

The gospel reading from Mark 13 is a complex and terrifying scripture but I take this from it. Towards the end, we are told to be alert. The metaphor is of a man going away and putting his servants in charge, with someone specifically appointed to watch. There is passive watching and there is active watching. The man on watch was I suppose a first century security guard. The man on watch would have done something, not just watched.

We do not know what the future holds, but we do know that we have been entrusted with the responsibility to act as agents of God. Not passively waiting for the clouds to break open, but actively getting on with daily discipleship. One of the big questions is how what we have learned over the past few much will shape how we be church in the future.

I leave you with an old joke, which says something about contemplating the future. It's a moving, heart-warming, feelgood family story is about a boy who got a pet hamster for Christmas. He loved the hamster, gave it a name, called it Harry, looked after it – fed it, cleaned it out, cuddled it, played with it. He was a bright lad and he read up on hamsters and to his shock and sadness, discovered that hamsters only lived for about three years.

So, one day he said to his day, "Dad, what happens when Harry the Hamster dies? What will we do?" His Dad says, "Well, it's hopefully a long time off but when it happens we'll put him in a shoe box then we'll bury him and, er, we can have a bit of a party. You can invite some friends round and we'll get some pop & pizza & cake – & perhaps have a sleepover, and we might buy something else in place of Harry". There's a long pause and then the lad says, "Can we kill him now Dad?"