

## Reflections and Prayers for Advent – Waiting

This is the 37<sup>th</sup> in a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are kindly sourced by many people. You are invited to use them freely for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

### ‘I waited patiently for the Lord’

The text I chose for the very first sermon I preached was the opening verse of Psalm 40. I was in my second year as an undergraduate and had just months previously heeded the call of Christ. Yet here I was, already daring to lead people in their worship. “I waited patiently for the Lord,” I declaimed and, looking back, I wonder at the cheek of it. Patience has never been my longest suit.

At the time I preached this sermon, I was deep into reading the work of Geoffrey Chaucer. I mention that because I’d been scratching my head about one of the Canterbury Tales, the Clerk’s Tale, where an abusive husband seeks to test his wife’s loyalty by imposing a series of cruel blows against her, including taking her children away from her and even forging a papal bull to dissolve the marriage. Her name was Griselda and, year after year, she stuck it out and remained loyal to her rotten awful partner. The tale is told to demonstrate the meaning of patience. I simply couldn’t understand it.

If patience is about being submissive, supine, passive (the words are related) then I confess not only to having almost none but also to being glad about that. And yet patience is highly spoken of in the Bible again and again. In the Old Testament, Job is commended for it, indeed he epitomises it – who hasn’t heard of the “patience of Job?” And in the New Testament, it’s listed as one of the fruits of the Spirit [Galatians 5.22] along with indisputable virtues like joy and peace, kindness and generosity. So what am I missing here?

I used to play a lot of cricket. Nothing pleased me better than captaining our local team in Burry Port. To do that, I would generally take my fielding position in the slips, alongside the wicket keeper, behind the batsman, the ideal place for Mission Control. As the bowler trundled in to hurl the ball down the pitch, I’d hitch my trousers, balance myself on the balls of my feet, crouch slightly forward of perpendicular, ready to throw myself to left or right, to scoop an edged ball from my bootstraps or fling myself in the air if it flew off the shoulder of the bat. I was ready. Every time the ball was bowled, I was waiting. Sometimes a whole game would be played with nothing to show for it. But I couldn’t know that. I waited patiently for the nick. I half-expected it with every delivery. I couldn’t allow my concentration to lapse.



Now there’s a piece of work that required patience, but patience of an active rather than a passive kind. It was invested with waiting and also with watching. And it was expectant.

In the French language, there’s a world of difference between the simple verb *attendre* and its pronominal partner *s’attendre*. The first simply means “to wait” – for a bus, for time to pass, for the penny to drop. The second means “to expect,” to await the good news, to expect better behaviour, to anticipate (with joy) the end of the pandemic.

All this brings us into territory where I’m more than comfortable. This is all about “patience with a purpose” rather than something that is accompanied by shrugs and sighs and sad self-pity. Patience turns out to be a cocktail of ingredients rather than some kind of bland dispiriting complan.

There are myriad commentaries on Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*. The waiting referred to doesn’t advance any ideas, engender any decisive action, or even reveal what’s being waited for. The only discernible development is a single leaf that appears on a tree between its two acts. Contrast that with the waiting that’s referred to in Psalm 130. “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who wait for the morning.” Here’s the suggestion

that we must add hope to expectation and watching and waiting as the constituent elements that together make up this “patience with a purpose.”

The poet R.S.Thomas was at prayer in his remote parish church. He sat in the dark interior and wondered why he seemed to be getting no answers to his prayers. Is God deaf, he wondered, or disinterested? Or am I wrong to suppose that he’ll speak when I tell him to? And then, in a sublime phrase, he calms himself down with the thought that “the meaning is in the waiting.”

I waited patiently for the Lord, that was my first text. But there was more for we hear that he inclined towards the supplicant and heard his plea. Prayer must be done patiently but purposefully. And waiting includes expectation. God’s inclining to us presupposes our inclining to him. In that way, we may indeed find a way out of the desolate pit, the miry bog, where we so often find ourselves. I can certainly wait patiently for that.

*Revd Dr Leslie Griffiths, December 2020. Leslie is a former President of the Conference and member of the House of Lords: for many years he served as superintendent minister at Wesley’s Chapel, London until he retired in 2017. The photo is from Cricket Times: for the uninitiated, Ross Taylor is taking a stunning catch at first slip (for New Zealand), just as Leslie surely did for Burry Port a few years ago.*

## Time Line

The past as part of the present is a concept that fits me very well as I spent many working hours as a therapeutic social worker exploring the pasts of those whose journeys I had engaged with. Often it was as if we were truly back there in that time and it could feel very challenging and rather strange. Depending on age it could be the recent past or a much longer time ago. Mostly the past intruded too much into the present.

My own past has also felt part of my present these last few months, although in a much easier way. I think it was triggered by the original lockdown reminding me of long school holidays with no structure and no commitments but, in my memory, very nice weather. The holidays seemed to stretch for ever, just as lockdown has. A couple of months ago I went exploring with my husband in the area where I grew up, not far from where I live now. In particular I was looking for the farm where we used to buy eggs. I had always carried with me an image of an old-fashioned farmyard with stalls for the animals. The farm took some finding as it was, quite literally, “off the beaten track”, although clearly marked on the OS map. When we eventually came upon it, it stopped us in our tracks. We were looking at a beautiful, if somewhat dilapidated, 17th century farmhouse which is a Grade 2 listed building (see photo). My little girl’s mind hadn’t registered that. It was the kind farmer who allowed us to walk round the farmyard, looking at the animals that I had remembered! We often see the past in a different light when we revisit it, although the feelings remain. That warm September day when I walked up the track again, so many years later, it was like I was 7 or 8 again and walking with my dad to buy the eggs.



During these past few months, I have pondered a lot about time, how to use the extra time I have had, the missed time of things I can’t do and people I can’t see and what I will do differently with my time when normality returns. Now we have arrived in Advent, a time of waiting expectantly, a time in which we usually try and pause in the frenetic rush up to Christmas, though not so much this year. Christmas will be different and so, therefore, will Advent.

However, it can be a positive time if we are creative enough. Many of us have explored different ways of worshipping these last nine months, have worshipped with extra or different people and have forged deeper relationships through phone calls, emails and Zoom meetings. Therefore, it seems that this Advent we have something special to grasp hold of that mustn’t slip through our fingers.

Quite a long time ago, the French priest and poet, Michel Quoist, wrote about time. In my recent time travelling I have dipped into my rather battered copy of one of his books (which cost 10s 6d!). His sense of how we use our time seems ageless and resonates for me with the challenges facing us at this particular time:

“You who are beyond time, Lord, you smile to see us fighting it and you know what you are doing. You make no mistakes in your distribution of time to us. You give each of us time to do what you want us to do but we must not lose time, waste time, kill time, for time is a gift that you give us, but a perishable gift, a gift that does not keep. Lord, I have time. I have plenty of time, all the time that you give me - the years of my life, the days of my years, the hours of my days. They are all mine to fill, quietly, calmly, but to fill completely, up to the brim.....I am not asking you Lord for time to do this and then that, but your grace to do conscientiously, in the time that you give me, what you want me to do.”

We still have that time even though our experience this year has been so different. Just as the long ago past, like the farmhouse, is still with us, so this recent past will accompany us into the new year and beyond. One day we may view it from the vantage point of the now far distant future and what will we think? How different will we have become because of this year? Will our priorities have changed? How much closer to God will we have remained, as well as to each other? The challenge will be how to hold on to the blessings we have received amidst the rush of greater activity when time may, once again, seem outside our control.

In this time of Advent, we can model ourselves on Mary “who treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2 v19). God has given us the gift of time to do so.

*Margaret Lee, December 2020. Margaret lives in Swanwick, Derbyshire and the photo is hers. The quote is from “Prayers of Life” p 77-78: published in English by Gill and Son in 1963 and originally written in 1954.*

## **‘But the waiting time ..... is the hardest time of all’**

This quotation is from a hymn by Sarah Doudney, a Portsmouth-born poet and hymn-writer, published in 1896 in a collection headed ‘Psalms of Life’. The first verse reads:

‘There are days of silent sorrow in the seasons of our life;  
There are wild depressing moments; there are hours of mental strife;  
There are times of stony anguish, when the tears refuse to fall;  
But the waiting time, my brothers, is the hardest time of all.’

A style redolent of the late Victorian era (the word ‘brothers’ is the main clue), yes, but words and sentiment surely so relevant today.

And, like Margaret Lee, I have a much-used copy of Michel Quoist’s ‘Prayers of Life’, acquired from my father to whom it was a gift during his ministry in Guernsey and containing the message ‘News by grapevine that you didn’t have a copy of this. Hope you’ll accept this copy. Mona’ (Mrs Mona Dorey, then a member of St Sampson’s Methodist Church). Time and waiting are inextricably linked.

Readers will know that my usual custom is to introduce the reflections from friends: this week, it seemed better to follow them, so many experiences do they evoke. I first led a full service and preached at Bletchingley in the Redhill Circuit on December 18<sup>th</sup> 1966, but my first genuine sermon inspiration came from listening to a late-night devotional radio programme, ‘Lighten our Darkness’, in early 1967 on the theme of waiting. It struck me as deeply insightful, both then and now, and it has been the foundation of a probably over-used but much-changed sermon ever since. Hence the heading of this piece.



We spend time waiting, which may imply wasting our time. Sometimes waiting has to be, for a rendezvous or an event or a means of travel, so as not to be late: we don’t wish to let down a friend or miss the start or, worse still, miss the train or plane.

We wait for all sorts of reasons, often accompanied by anxiety: for the outcomes of medical tests, for exam results, for our covid-19 vaccination, for wars to end, for health to be restored after illness, for the opportunity to meet friends and family again, for news of someone in distress or even an imminent death.

But, as Leslie has indicated, not all waiting is wasting. Think of the moments waiting and watching: we wait and watch will friends and loved ones in hours of need, and hope – unlike Jesus' disciples in Gethsemane – that we can stay awake to be truly supportive. Never underestimate 'waiting with': don't worry about 'doing' anything – the doing is the waiting, being alongside. It is a profoundly important pastoral ministry in which we all may share.

Both Leslie and Margaret have reminded us that Advent is a time of waiting, and as the Revd Dr Christine Dutton (a minister in the North Cheshire Circuit) has written in her introduction to this week's events at Wesley Church, Chester, 'this Advent and Christmas we may together discover the Christ who is waiting for us as we wait for him.' Hoping, longing and waiting – these human, personal experiences are deeply embedded and intertwined in the themes of Advent.

*John Bell, December 2020. Before Joan and I were married in July 1967, I lived on my own in a flat in Crawley: it was pre-internet and I didn't have a TV, so my sole source of external input was a green Roberts radio I had purchased as a student in Manchester in 1960. The identical retro version, albeit with C21 facilities, is available from a well-known on-line retailer at a mere £198. Photo of typical airport queues, waiting to check in: I don't miss them.*

### Third liturgy for Advent – Waiting

John the Baptist, by his preaching and by water poured,  
brought to those who heard his teaching news of hope restored:  
'Keep your vision strong and steady, and be ready for the Lord.'

From Matthew 11: 2-4: Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?' And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see'.

Like Moses who never reached the Promised Land, denied the fruits of his lifetime's labours, John the Baptist, languishing in prison, waits to discover whether the man he'd encountered at the River Jordan really is the Messiah, but he doesn't live to share in his mission. Perhaps, in defining John's unique role, on the cusp of the Old and New Testaments, God never intended that he should. Moses led the way, John pointed the way: neither shared in the ultimate joy. But they did not wait in vain: maybe they just missed the lap of honour.

Can that be our experience in this very unusual Advent? By whatever means are available at this strange time, we can lead the way to Bethlehem and point the way to Jesus, the Lord and saviour of the world, then, like the sower in the parable, wait and see, believing that our labour will not be in vain either.

*In preparation for prayer, you may wish to light a candle.*

Loving God, we give thanks for those women and men who, in the tradition of John the Baptist, pointed us towards Jesus and showed us the way, sometimes many decades ago. We pause in silence..... and remember who they were then and are for us even now. We owe them a mighty debt and are thankful. Amen.

*John Bell, December 2020. The hymn by Mark Earey is StF 165, verse 3.*

#### Note and encouragement to all readers

I have collected and compiled these reflections and prayers, including some of my own thoughts. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at [belljohna@btinternet.com](mailto:belljohna@btinternet.com) Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Hymns are referenced as far as possible from their most recent publication in a British Methodist hymnbook (Singing the Faith – StF, Hymns and Psalms – H&P or even the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book – MHB), and, for URC readers, in Rejoice and Sing (R&S), the URC's present hymnal.