

Waiting for God, waiting on God

Texts: Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37

You can buy almost anything these days. The other week, there was a fully functional antique RAF fighter jet for sale on e-Bay. This week, I read in the papers that you can now buy Christmas! I kid you not. If you can't wait, you can *order* Christmas now for any day of the year. The company simply turns up on your doorstep and make Christmas happen for you on the day of your choice.

'Buy Christmas' - that, to me, is the ultimate expression of the spirit of our age: we simply can't wait. We are in a hurry; any waiting is a waste of time. Why wait until 25th December - have Christmas now! So, celebrating the season of Advent is the ultimate gesture of a Christian counter culture. In Advent, the Church quite deliberately sets aside time to practice the holy art of *waiting* - waiting for the advent, or coming, of the Messiah. But what does it mean to wait? What precisely are we waiting for?

To answer these questions, perhaps we should first ask why our culture so hates waiting. Perhaps it is because waiting seems so very passive, and we prize being active above all else. One symptom is that at work, colleagues who are about to retire are always at pains to tell us how they plan to 'stay active' during their retirement. Waiting, on the other hand, seems necessarily passive, and therefore goes against the grain.

But wait a minute - *wait* a minute. Before we agree too hastily that waiting is necessarily passive, we ought to pause and consider. To gain a fresh understanding of what it may mean to wait, I want you to cast your minds back to those school French lessons. Can you remember the French word for 'wait'? 'To wait', *en Français*, is *attendre*, which is one of those *faux amis*, or, 'false friends' for the learner of French. It is spelt and sounds like the English word 'attend', but has a different meaning. In French, *attendre* means 'to wait', which doesn't seem to have anything to do with the English verb 'to attend'; or does it?

The first meaning the OED gives to the word 'attend' is 'to direct the ears, mind [or] energies to anything'. In other words, to 'attend to' something is to 'pay attention' to that something. The second meaning given by the OED is 'to watch over, wait upon, with service, accompany as servant, go with, be present at.' This sense of the word, as least in its noun form, is still used today. So, in the court circular of 24th October this year, we read:

The Duke of York this morning arrived in China and was received by Her Majesty's Consul-General for Shanghai ... Mr. Alastair Watson and Squadron Leader Charlotte Fenn, RAF are *in attendance*.

In other words, Alastair Watson and Charlotte Fenn 'attended' the Duke of York when he arrived; or you can say, they 'waited on' him. There's the connection between the English word 'attend' and the French word *attendre*. Presumably Mr. Watson and Ms. Fenn didn't just twitch their thumbs and generally look bored at the airport. Instead, they would have paid close attention to their royal guest so that they could attend to his needs and wishes. This form of 'waiting' is, of course, enshrined in the word 'waiter' - one who waits on, or attends to, the needs and wishes of patrons at a restaurant.

This kind of 'waiting' - ears pricked, eyes peeled - is the kind of waiting that Jesus was calling for in Mark 13:

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. (v.33)

That is the kind of waiting that the Church bids us practice during Advent. That kind of waiting is exhausting. If you get bored, you can be quite sure that you're not doing it!

But what are we to wait for? We are, of course, waiting for God to come to us. But there's the rub - how do we recognise God? To wait for someone meaningfully, we need to know what the person looks like. That much we learn from Samuel Beckett's famous play, *Waiting for Godot*. Two men, Estragon and Vladimir, were chit chatting while waiting for the arrival of a mysterious character called Godot. Half way through Act 1, without warning, a boy Pozzo appeared along the road:

ESTRAGON: Is that him?

VLADIMIR: Who?

ESTRAGON: Er ...

VLADIMIR: Godot?

ESTRAGON: Yes.

At this point Pozzo joins in: 'I present myself: Pozzo.'

Whereupon Vladimir says to Estragon: 'Not at all!'

ESTRAGON: She said Godot.

VLADIMIR: Not at all!

So, a puzzled Estragon turns to Pozzo, 'You're not Godot, Ma'am?', earning an irritated answer, 'I am Pozzo!'

It turns out that Estragon and Vladimir knew nothing about this Godot, not even what he looked like. So they were desperate for the first person who comes their way to be Godot, much to Pozzo's annoyance.

During Advent, the Church bids us practice waiting for God - turning our heightened attention Godward to wait for God's coming to us. The question I want to ask this morning is simply this: how would we recognise God if and when God turns up? Will we do any better than Estraton and Vladimir?

Isaiah was waiting for God. He was waiting for God to make good the promise to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. It still hadn't happened - the people were too busy getting on with their own lives to bother with a pile of old stones; and God didn't seem to care. Isaiah was getting pretty fed up by God's no-show. That's why in our passage today, he let out that heart-rending cry:

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down! (64:1a)

The word used there for 'tear open' is almost exclusively used for the ripping of cloth in the rest of the Old Testament. Isaiah had clear expectations of how he would recognise the answer to his prayer. If God rips open the heaven and comes down, then

... the mountains would quake at [God's] presence, as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil (64:1b-2a)

There would be no mistaking of God's entry onto the stage of human affairs; it would be spectacular. Interestingly, in rest of the Old Testament after Isaiah, nothing like that ever happened: there was no stage direction for 'Enter God with fanfare'. If you carry on reading you Bible after Isaiah, the first time you come to anything remotely like an answer to Isaiah's prayer happens in the beginning of Mark's Gospel. After the baptism of Jesus by John, we read this:

Just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Matthew and Luke also recorded this incident, but they used a tame word - the heavens 'opened' - a bit like an automatic door. Mark, on the other hand, used an action word - the heavens were 'torn apart'. Matthew uses the same Greek word to talk about the curtain in the Temple ripping in two from top to bottom when Jesus died. It's the word for ripping cloth! The resonance with Isaiah could not be clearer:

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ...
... he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

No quaking mountains, no roaring bonfire, no boiling water. Just an ordinary baptism, like many before and since.

Every year at Advent, I ask myself the same question: if I were a first century Jew, would I have recognised Jesus as God's answer to Isaiah's prayer to rip the heavens open and come down? The more I think about this, the less confident I am that the answer would be 'yes'. Saint John's words ring louder in my ears as the years go by:

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. (KJV)

Like Isaiah, I would have expected fanfare and special effects all round. I think I would have missed Jesus the Messiah. It is with this unsettling thought that I go into Advent every year, as I heed the Church's bidding to practice once more the holy art of waiting, of attending to God with my ears pricked and eyes peeled so that I won't miss God's coming.

So I invite you to reflect with me on two questions during the rest of this service and for the rest of this Advent season. First, do we expect God to come to us? Or are we so indifferent that provided as long as we have our 10:45 service, God can mind God's own business, thank you very much. Second, if God suddenly turns up in the midst of St. Peter's, would we recognise God? Or do we have our expectations so badly out of kilter that we would in fact let God slip through our midst, out of the door and into Luton Place, without us ever noticing?

Let us pray:

Keep us alert, we pray, O Lord our God,
as we await the advent of Christ your Son,
so that when he comes he may find us ready to recognise him
in the least of his brothers and sisters,
in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. Amen