

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Psalm 70; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Come Lord Jesus ... and we're still waiting

The other night I indulged in some channel hopping and found myself watching a religious programme about a televangelist who was supplying a blow-by-blow account of how and when Jesus would return. He was doing nothing new. In every generation there are Christians who conclude that Christ's second coming is at hand. They reach this decision on the basis of their biblical research (usually a highly selective use of the books of Daniel and Revelation) and believe that at a certain time they will hear the blast of the angel's trumpet that will herald the Lord's return – which we call, to use a technical term, the Parousia.

The televangelist, like all these Parousia speculators, seem to ignore Jesus' warning that it's not for us to know that time. That said, we acclaim the Parousia in the Great Thanksgiving: 'Christ will come in glory.' 'Your coming we await; Amen! Come Lord Jesus.' We affirm it in the Creed, 'he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.' So, the Parousia isn't the reserve of the theologically weird – what's more, it presents in today's New Testament and Gospel readings.

The Thessalonians, like many Christians at that time, were looking for Jesus' return in their lifetime, and now they are anxious that they will miss out on this event. And what would happen to those believers who died in the meantime? Were they lost to God? Paul gives a clear answer, 'Don't grieve as others do who have no hope.' In other words, certainly grieve, though not as people who have nothing to look forward to – as if the grave were the last word. Paul then goes on to describe the time when God will create a new world. For this, the only possible language he can use is a highly colourful and metaphorical. That aside, Paul's purpose is quite practical. How do we live as we await the return of Christ? It's also a question that Matthew confronts with that story about the bridesmaids.

Paul and Matthew are addressing faith communities who are waiting... waiting for Jesus to return... waiting for God to do something. The question these people are asking is, 'How long will we have to wait, Jesus?' 'When are you coming back?'

Matthew's parable doesn't quite resonate with me because it's not how we do weddings today. Virginal bridesmaids getting up in the middle of night with their lamps isn't quite our style. That aside, it's a story about waiting... waiting for something that's seemingly overdue.

Waiting is something we know about. It goes back to our childhood... waiting for Christmas or our birthday... or today, it might be waiting for a phone call from a certain special someone... waiting for an email to confirm or not some significant news. Or perhaps it's that time when we wait to begin a new season in life – waiting for retirement or a move to a new place or taking up a new job. Waiting carries many emotions – anticipation, wonder, eagerness, dread, agitation, fear, longing, loss. Of course, much of our emotional response is determined by that for which we wait. Our time of waiting will be experienced differently depending on that which we expect. As I say that, I wonder what it is that you're waiting for...

I readily admit, I don't carry the anxiety or anticipation that those early Christians had, waiting for the Lord's return, though reading these passages poses me with a question about how I choose to be in my waiting – whatever it is that I'm waiting for.

It seems to me that waiting, with a Christian perspective, isn't an idle thing – it's not a time when we sit there twiddling our thumbs and marking time. It's not an unproductive place between where we are

and where we want or expect to go. Waiting, as both Paul and Matthew portray it, is an active season. It's a time flavoured by the promise that God will come and do something new, good, and transformative – or, as the opening lines of the psalm put it, waiting for the Lord to come in haste and help.

Waiting is a movement from something to something more. Henri Nouwen spoke of 'the secret of waiting as the faith that the seed has been planted, and that something has begun.' This is about living in the present and making the most of what we're experiencing and what we have now – knowing that something good and new is happening. It's about trusting that God is in our waiting – that God is doing something.

At times I can be like the bridesmaids who fell asleep. I grow weary waiting, frustrated by the lack of apparent outcomes, or distracted by the various obligations that fill my life. Then I remember that waiting – waiting to see what God is up to – waiting for Jesus to come to do something new and transformative – isn't a passive thing. It's about living in the present and making the most of what we're experiencing and what we have now – knowing that something good and new will occur.

Waiting... waiting for God to act... waiting for Jesus to come... is an open-ended dynamic. That can be difficult because we tend to wait for something we wish to have – for an outcome that we want. But that's a way of controlling the future because we want it to go in a specific direction. But the open-ended waiting I see that Matthew and Paul are presenting, trusts that something will happen to us and with us that's beyond our imaginings. It allows God to be truly God. It says that God will show up. Our responsibility is to heed those words at the end of the parable, 'Keep awake therefore...'. Stay alert... keep watch for what God is doing in you, for you, and about you. God is present. And so, we pray, 'Your coming we await; Amen! Come Lord Jesus.'

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