

Waiting

Salvador Dali's painting prosaically entitled 'Girl standing at the Window' is not obviously religious, yet it epitomises the season of Advent that begins today. The girl, more a woman than a girl, is concretely located in our space. She is where we would stand, looking at what we can see. She looks into an infinitely receding horizon. We can't see if she is looking forlornly or with hope? Is she happy or sad? How long has she stood there? What is she looking for? What is she waiting for? Is she looking forward to a boat returning or remembering something from the past, a boat that sailed away?¹

On the first day of Advent, we stand where she stands. Looking through the window, stretching into the future, we long for a time that will come. "Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free."

That's what Advent is about. Yet we make it hectic by bringing Christmas into it. While once Advent calendars heightened the sense of waiting as we counted up to Christmas, the modern ones that deliver a piece of chocolate every time a window is opened no longer encourage waiting, which is the prevalent mood of the season. Quite apart from the fact they are themed around Marvel comics or Little Princess stories rather than Advent and Christmas, delivering a gift each day speaks of wishes granted immediately, not patient waiting.

Luke's story of Elizabeth and Zechariah – like that of Mary and Joseph to a lesser extent – is about waiting. This blameless and righteous couple were both getting on in years. What a wait they had! The baby Elizabeth carried was to be their first child – and throughout her pregnancy Zechariah was unable to speak. They waited for the birth of their child and they waited to hear Zechariah's voice once more. When he spoke, it was to praise God.

The hymn (or canticle of praise) Zechariah spoke rejoiced that God had at last acted. It relived the story of Israel and its expectations. For centuries Israel had watched and waited for salvation. Now the waiting was nearly over. John, the

Forerunner of the Messiah, was born. Zechariah's hymn is a shout of praise for fulfilled waiting, but its later verses betray the fact there is still more waiting to do:

"By the tender mercy of God the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace." (Luke 1: 78f.)

We still look out for the dawn that will lead us out of darkness into peace.

There are many, many people for whom waiting is an unbearable strain. The impoverished and undervalued jobless searching for work,

the childless who desperately want to be parents,

the hungry subsistence farmers whose crops regularly fail,

the lonely single people clogging online dating agencies looking for love

and the long-term ill who wait for the break-through in medical treatment

are not in joy-filled waiting rooms.

Often we think of waiting as wasted time and much of our attitude in waiting is impatience: the tooting of horns at traffic lights,

the fidgeting in doctors' surgeries

and the frustration we feel as we wait for test results or exam results

all testify to the fact that we don't like to be kept waiting. We want the object of our desires to materialise and we want it to happen soon, even here and now.

Nothing illustrates that impatience better than the modern Christmas in Britain, where in our excited anticipation Advent becomes crowded out, with Christmas brought forward to such an extent that, by the time Christmas begins, we are fed up with Christmas dinner, we are sick of Christmas carols and the Christmas decorations are jaded and faded. There's virtue and value in waiting for it.

Waiting is not all wasted time. Waiting has value because it gives us time to reflect and it can rescue us from delusion. The

process of waiting can force us to go deeper, to refine our desires and reassess what really matters. Waiting can be a cooling-off period, giving us time to ask whether we are longing for the right things, the real pearls without price, the genuine priceless treasure? Good waiting doesn't always come easy in an age when people look for snappy and quick, immediate returns.

For the Christian, waiting is good in that it stresses our dependence. When we wait, we come face to face with our own limitations; when we wait, we can't control the timing. So waiting speaks of ways in which we are incomplete; it shows us we can't be completely self-sufficient. We wait because we need something or someone to help us, to supply us with something we lack. We wait because we cannot solve all our problems under our own steam.

This is a truth that lies at the heart of our faith and at the centre of this season of Advent: we cannot save ourselves;

we cannot heal our own wounds;

we need help from beyond ourselves;

we need "the mighty saviour God has raised up" of whom Zechariah spoke.

This awareness of our need for outside help is perhaps one of the reasons why Samuel Becket's play *Waiting for Godot* struck such a chord in the 1950s that it became one of the most successful plays of the 20th century. Not much happens in the play. Two vagrants simply talk. Their conversation discusses the hardships and the loneliness of human existence as they wait for a figure called Godot, who never arrives, though on two occasions we are told by a child messenger that Godot will come "tomorrow."

That's the other side of waiting – arriving. For the girl standing at the window in Dali's painting, the arrival might be a ship coming over the horizon,

a glint of sun on the sea heralding the dawn,

a dark cloud on the horizon presaging an approaching storm

or the setting sun bringing the calm of night-time darkness. We don't know what Dali's woman waits for.

But we do know that Advent invites us to wait and to recover our sense of dependence on what God does for us. In Advent we look back and remember the past arrival of God in Jesus son of Mary and we look forward for the arrival of God in the present moment,

when we can apprehend God who is beyond space and time in the here and now of our daily existence.

We wait for God's whispers of wisdom and we long for the day when peace reigns,

hope presides,

joy abounds

and love fills all gaps in our lives and fulfils all we need.

God is with us in the waiting *and* in the arriving. Christmas – the Feast of Christ's Nativity – is coming: wait for it....

¹ *Roots: Resources for the weekly lectionary* provided the idea behind this opening paragraph