

SEASONS OF THE SPIRIT

December 4th 2002

ADVENT

The trouble with Christmas is that it is over so quickly. The build-up begins in October, so by Boxing Day we have become fed up with Christmas cheer and are only too happy to put the decorations away for another year. The secret of enjoying Christmas is to make the most of Advent, the four weeks of preparation leading up to it. Then Christmas becomes a beginning not an end, because we have taken time to prepare for it not just materially but spiritually.

Choir I'm dreaming of a white Christmas Irving Berlin

Advent 1955

The Advent wind begins to stir
With sea-like sounds in our Scotch fir,
It's dark at breakfast, dark at tea,
And in between we only see
Clouds hurrying across the sky
And rain-wet roads the wind blows dry
And branches bending to the gale
Against great skies all silver-pale.
The world seems travelling into space,
And travelling at a faster pace
Then in the leisured summer weather
When we and it sit out together,
For now we feel the world spin round
On some momentous journey bound-
Journey to what? to whom? to where?
The Advent bells call out 'Prepare,
Your world is journeying to the birth
Of God made Man for us on earth.'

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Some ways indeed are very odd
By which we hail the birth of God.
We raise the price of things in shops,
We give plain boxes fancy tops
And lines which traders cannot sell
Thus parcell'd go extremely well.
We dole out bribes we call a present
To those to whom we must be pleasant
For business reasons. Our defence is
These bribes are charged against expenses
And bring relief in Income Tax.
Enough of these unworthy cracks!
'The time draws near the birth of Christ',
A present that cannot be priced
Given two thousand years ago.
Yet if God had not given so
He still would be a distant stranger
And not the Baby in the manger.

One way of using this season of Advent creatively is to cultivate a sense of expectancy and waiting; watching and waiting for the coming of the King and his Kingdom.

Year passes after year, silently; Christ's coming is ever nearer than it was. O that, as he comes nearer earth, we may approach nearer heaven! O my brethren, pray him to give you the heart to seek him in sincerity. Pray him to make you in earnest. You have one work only, to bear your cross after him. Resolve in his strength to do so. Resolve to be no longer beguiled by 'shadows of religion' by words, or by disputings, or by notions, or by high professions, or by excuses, or by the world's promises or threats. Pray him to give you what Scripture calls 'an honest and good heart', or 'a perfect heart', and, without waiting, begin at once to obey him with the best heart you have. Any obedience is better than none, - any profession which is disjoined from obedience, is a mere pretence and deceit. Any religion which does not bring you nearer to God is of the world. You have to seek his face; obedience is the only way of seeking him. And then, according as we have waited for him, will he recompense us. If we have forgotten him, he will not know us; but 'blessed are those servants whom the Lord, when he cometh, shall find watching...

John Henry Newman

Choir Vigilate Byrd

"Blessed are those servants whom the Lord when he comes shall find watching" This idea of waiting expectantly is often used as an image for prayer, and this is memorably expressed by R.S. Thomas in his poem Kneeling: -

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun's light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.
Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

Choir Wachet Auf Bach

The meaning is in the waiting. In our fast-moving society we have become impatient with waiting, and find it irritating and irksome. But when we wait we give ourselves time to see things differently and to think. W. H. Vanstone, in his book *The Stature of Waiting*, argues that this experience of learning how to wait is something we should embrace, and something that gives us dignity.

Man is one who, like God, is handed over to the world, to wait upon it, to receive its power of meaning: to be the one upon whom the world bears in all its variety and intensity of meaning: to receive upon his transforming consciousness no mere photographic imprint of the world but its wonder and terror, its vastness and delicacy, its beauty and squalor, its good and evil. It is in this dimension - the dimension of meaning - that man receives the world; and as he does so, a figure exposed and waiting, he appears not diminished or degraded, but a figure of enormous dignity. As he waits in the future, increasingly dependent on systems and machines, on organization and technology, on medical support and social provision, he will in no sense be deprived of his high calling - that of standing beside God and receiving into the transforming mirror of his consciousness what the world really is. Whenever he so stands, in the future as in the past and present, man will be a figure of unique and almost unbelievable dignity.

Choir Es ist ein Ros entsprungen Praetorius

Advent is waiting-time. That was Mary's experience as she prepared for the birth of God's son. Waiting brings expectancy, and expectancy sharpens our senses and opens us up to what God is doing in our lives and our world.

Sheep like stones
In silent fold,
Snow like ash
Settling cold.

Walk a world
Bereft as dream,
Birdless wood,
Standing stream.

Bethlehem:
The children whine;
Travellers
Wait in line.

Tired men ring
The courtyard fire,
Tethered mules
Crowd the byre.

Stumble through
The cattle-pens;
Overhead
Roosting hens.

Spread with bales
The reeking floor;
Birthing bed:
Sacks and straw.

Trim the lamp;
Bemused and numb,
Watch and wait:
Soon, a son.

Advent Carol:
Jenny Overton

Choir Magnificat from 'Gloucester Service' Howells