

Waiting for God St Chad Holy Innocents Advent group

Holy Innocents 11th December

27 years is a long time to wait. 27 long years when you hardly see your family, when a generation is lost to you; 27 years not just of waiting but of enduring hard labour, oppression and attempts to undermine your dignity and integrity; 27 years that could have been shorter had Nelson Mandela chosen to accept Mr Botha's offers of freedom in return for silence and giving up on his hopes and dreams of equality justice and freedom for all. 27 years in which amazingly the good seed had time to be embedded in his soul the seed of justice and forgiveness, the seed of peace and reconciliation, the seed of generosity and kindness the seed of togetherness and unity; how easy it would have been to nourish in that soil of Robben Island, seeds of enmity and hatred, bitterness and selfishness. Like millions of others I have been gazing with awe at the grace found in Nelson Mandela.

And of course it puts a particular perspective on our theme of waiting for God in our world of instant gratification, could we have waited for 27 years for something from God or would we have given up long long ago.

You may think we have overdosed on Mandela but what I want to do this evening is to ask, "What might have helped Mandela in his waiting and what might help us in our waiting for God?"

One element was that he was aware of vast numbers of people waiting for him; waiting for justice waiting for freedom waiting for dignity waiting for their country back. It was going to be difficult to short-change them by stopping the waiting too early and compromising the very rights and values that he was waiting for. Those people on the outside helped him on the inside.

A thought that helps us in our waiting is that God too is waiting; God is waiting for us, waiting and longing; the waiting and longing in our hearts is echoed and mirrored in the waiting that God does.

We find this sense of the waiting of God in many places in the scriptures; take for example Elijah running away from Jezebel and her threats and being given sustenance on the journey to Mount Horeb and there what does he find? He finds God waiting for him; but I suppose we find the story of a waiting God especially in the Parable of the Prodigal son/ lost son/ prodigal Father whatever you might like to call it and that sense that the Father was waiting waiting till his son came to his senses and returns home. This idea of God waiting for us gives us encouragement in our own waiting to know that God is longing for a deeper relationship with us even more than we might long for a deeper relationship with God. Of course this image of a double waiting might conjure up for us the thought of two people arranging to meet at the doors into Debenhams and one person waits at one door and the other at the other door; prayer and waiting for God can sometimes feel like that of being so close and yet so far. However, the encouragement in our waiting is that God is to be found like Moses and the encounter by the burning bush if only we stop to notice that God is there all the time.

A parallel element is that there were not only people waiting for Mandela's release outside Robben island but there were people waiting with Mandela. He coped with the waiting because he was part of a community that was waiting together; and as they waited together they became stronger together, were supportive of each other and accountable to one another when things were tough for any one individual.

This sense of a communal waiting is perhaps more alien to us in our Western world where we sometimes think of waiting as a solitary activity. We wait on our own by ourselves. Perhaps you can remember times back at school when your parents mistimed things and you were the only one who was left to be picked up. The very solitariness made the waiting worse but how much better it was if there were two of you; how

encouraging the words shall I wait with you. Through the watches of the night we wait with the dying friend or family member as death steals up on them; we fear to die alone. Can there be then some kind of community of waiting can the Lord come to us as a group rather than each person making their own individual pilgrimage of waiting? Is there something in the African spirituality which says in the Kenyan liturgy "I am because we are" drawing on Professor John Mbiti's studies of African Traditional religion that can inspire us to a more communal spirituality of waiting for God, as we share our vulnerability and encourage one another deeper into the presence of God.

I am not great at waiting with people as patience is not my strong suit. When my wife was in the outpatients at Christies waiting for chemotherapy, I would of course accompany her; but I would be like a cat on hot bricks as time ticked by wanting to check if surely Sally's turn had been missed. Maybe waiting with people is something I need to learn; for Jesus the critical moments in his life were the ones he chose to have people with him, especially waiting in the garden of Gethsemane.

[Pause a moment to reflect on any experience you may have had in accompanying others or being accompanied during a time of waiting](#)

Another factor that might have helped was that Mandela couldn't do a lot about it; the very powerlessness of his situation made it possible to wait. The changes that were needed were outside his control. He could not release himself but another had to do so. We have some very good friends in Bondo in Western Kenya, a place that some of you from Holy Innocents will be aware of. They are nothing to do with the Bondo project but they do live there and we visited them this July. It's a harsh area climate wise and the rains are often inadequate. Waiting for rain is something they are used to doing. There is little they can do apart from pray in their waiting for rain; they can't magic up some rain somehow; in the long term they can plant more trees and encourage their neighbours to plant trees but even this project is fraught with difficulties like the year they raised 4000 tree seedlings in a good year for rain but then the beginning of the next year the rain failed and they had to decide between watering their tree seedlings or giving water to their cows to keep them alive. The seedlings went.

Powerless ness is seen as not a good thing and yet it aids our waiting. The story of Moses coming down the mountain in Exodus 32 to 34 is a significant one, for he comes down and finds that the people of Israel have dramatically failed to wait and somehow some gods have appeared out of the gold they chucked together in the furnace. Moses is furious. God is furious and there is a dialogue in which God says to Moses you go on ahead for if I come amongst you I will consume you; but do go on go ahead without me you'll be fine and I'll send an angel with you.

Moses of course knew very well that they would not be fine - for his people are defined by the fact that they are Yahweh's people and insists "unless you go with us we are not moving". Here then is the nub for those of us who find it difficult to wait for God. If we think, if we know we are powerless and hopeless without God then we will find it easy to wait. We can do no other; we are like people waiting for the rain, the crops simply won't grow without the rain. If on the other hand we feel that most of our lives as individuals and as churches ticks along just fine with or without God then we have a problem in waiting for God. Waiting for God speaks to us of our powerlessness before God and that is something that we self-sufficient independent people find hard to acknowledge. Perhaps that's why repentance is such an important part of Advent discipline, for repentance acknowledges that we are not the centre of the universe, we are not in control of our own lives but in a deep way we confess Jesus Christ as Lord.

[Pause to think for a moment on our own experiences of powerlessness at times when we felt at the mercy of other people's decisions and how it is to wait in these circumstances](#)

One major factor that helped Mandela through the 27 years of imprisonment was his sense of purpose; a clear sense of what he was fighting for kept him going even at the times when a good outcome seemed impossible. It was a purpose that he articulated in his famous speech at his trial explaining why he and others did what they did and what the ideals were that he was fighting for and was prepared to die for. Surely this sense of purpose made it easier for Mandela to reject the offers from PW Botha to release him on certain conditions and to endure the waiting period.

That same sense of purpose is found in the story of the persistent widow in Luke 18 who keeps knocking on the door of the judge until she gets justice; we don't know what the issue was for her but it seems that her very livelihood depended on the outcome of her case. She wasn't going to give up because the outcome mattered however long she had to wait for that outcome.

These two examples give a different slant to our notion of waiting. I think I associate waiting with being not only solitary but also passive. A passivity that is associated with powerlessness, but here the powerless widow was not going to let her powerlessness stop her from doing all she could to protect her livelihood her campaign for justice. When we wait for God what kind of a waiting is it? What is happening in the space of waiting in the waiting room so to speak? Is it like being in the doctor's waiting room waiting for god to pay attention to us. Is it waiting as in a gardener waiting for the seed to germinate for the time to be right which is part of our Advent discipline as we recall how When the time was fully right God sent his Son, as Paul puts it in Galatians and we reflect on how even though the Jews had been longing for Messiah to come for years and years, at this point, when the Greek language was universal, when Roman rule had brought with it many nasty things but at least it brought peace and the ability to travel and you could add to this list to make the point that God waited for just the right time for Jesus to be born into our world. Or is the waiting a more active waiting for example of a pregnancy where you don't sit around doing nothing but especially for a first child there is plenty of preparation going on. What does it mean to wait purposefully in Advent or more generally for God- is it about allowing God space to do some work on us like a gardener pruning here and there fertilising this or that? Or is it a more proactive waiting along the lines of those parables that speak of the Master returning at any time so we need to complete the things that we have been commissioned to work for? Perhaps for example, we will not rest until we see justice established on earth and God's righteousness established among the nations.

[Pause If God asked you today what are you waiting for. What might you say?](#)

I heard the story the other day of someone visiting an old lady in North Manchester and telling her of the release of Nelson Mandela from prison. Oh I know said the lady and drew out of a drawer a picture of Nelson Mandela and said I have prayed every day for the release of this man for the last 27 years and this day is precious to me. I am not sure how much prayer was part of Mandela's life in prison but thousands of people were praying for him and his fellow inmates.

Prayer sustains us in our waiting in all its various forms. The parable of the persistent widow is an encouragement to prayer and to keep the faith. Jesus in Gethsemane watches and waits in prayer knowing the ordeal he is to undergo. The story of Elijah on Mount Horeb is an interesting one as he encounters God on the mountain top and looks for God in the earthquake the wind and the fire but finds no trace of God in any of them; but then there comes the sound of silence. One Rabbi translates this as the sound of God breathing. And Dennis Lennon links this to the interpretation of the divine name YHWH as breath which Rob Bell also points out in one of his NOOMA DVDs called Breathe.

Listening to the sound of God breathing speaks of the attentiveness that waiting on God requires, because you can easily miss the sound of breathing. So whether our waiting is passive or proactive it is an attentive

waiting isn't it and intimately connected to prayer. Picking up the Breathing theme, George Herbert makes the link in his poem Prayer

*Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth
Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tow'r,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices; something understood.*

So as we reflect this evening on waiting we have drawn on the resources that may have helped Mandela in his 27 year imprisonment we have spoken of the people outside the prison and within, his powerlessness that forced on him the waiting, the sense of purpose he had and the prayers of the people. We have tried to link that with our own resources for waiting

- That God is waiting for us
- A community of waiting – what might that look like
- Our own powerlessness and dependence on God that calls for repentance
- A purpose to our waiting and how passive or proactive that might be
- Prayer in waiting and attentiveness to the sound of God's breath

Time to discuss