

Sermon Advent 1 Year C 2021

It seems to me, as a bit of an outsider, that for many marriages today the overwhelming focus is on the big day, with all the fairy-tale trappings, so much so that the idea of the wedding as simply the *beginning* of marriage is largely lost. Not much is also made of the engagement anymore as well. Again a shame, because this too is actually very important. This is when it is *publicly* acknowledged that a certain *separation* has taken place. And it is a separation from all sorts of things. Certain options are now closed off. The couple are formally recognised as a couple, and many of the commitments and expectations of marriage are put in place. The engagement marks a *transition* from one stage of life to another. It is a letting go of an old life and establishing the bonds of a new one. This phase can be a bit unsettling – not yet married but defiantly no longer single. On the way to something, but not quite there. It is *a crossing over* as a new identity is being formed.

Such markers - turning points, really - punctuate every person's life. These can be moments of great joy, but also of sadness, for those involved. Just think of important transitions experienced from pregnancy to birth; from childhood to adolescence; from life to death. And at all these key moments the church, through the gift of God, has the Sacraments to help us make sense of what is going on. We all need help to make sense of our lives. And the sacraments are the best tools we have at our disposal to do this hard work. Because we do need help at these moments of transition in our lives. These moments of change are always accompanied by tension, confusion and awkwardness. Think of when a child is brought home a few days after birth; a teenager struggling through puberty; or when a loved one dies. We have to *let go* of something, so something *new* can come into being. And that can be tricky! People speak of feeling lost, disoriented during these periods. It can be difficult to inhabit the ambiguous, in-between place.

It is actually important to take note of these in-between places in our lives. But in our culture today there seems to be a very strong urge to suppress or control the messiness and ambiguities and difficulties of the 'in-between place'

– a flattening out of the road through life. The rites of passage - which in our culture the Church has traditionally been guardian - are barely celebrated at all now. This is a shame because it is here, more than any other phases of our lives, that new and marvellous things take shape. But they emerge and take shape only through patient waiting, discomfort, loss and even death.

Advent gives us time to pause and consider this time of waiting, this in-between place. It is a waiting with Mary, because of course pregnancy is one of those great human experiences of the in-between place. But the readings and prayers of this holy season also direct us to a waiting for the return of Christ at the end of time. When we sing or say, '*Come, Emmanuel*', we do so not only with our hearts and minds set on Christ's birth at Bethlehem. '*Come, Emmanuel*' is also a prayer for his second coming. We have two foci for this season, the two advents of Christ: one in the past; one yet to be.

That the church is called to wait ought not surprise us. Waiting is if you like, the default position of the people of God. Long before the church was Israel, the original people of God. Israel was born and formed in the in-between places, in waiting, in crisis: in captivity in Egypt, in the desert for 40 years, in Babylon for 80 years. These experiences of waiting *shaped* Israel's own understanding of itself. As the people of Israel gave way to the new people of God – the church – it too found itself in another desert of sorts, another crisis, namely, that Christ had not returned as was expected. And so, the New Testament writers urge the infant church *to wait*. Hence the strong, forceful exhortations of the Gospel today: stay awake. Watch. Pray. Essentially, the Gospel writer Luke is saying, *don't give up. Hang in there. The hoped-for change will come...* It is worth noting that the change that comes with waiting for Christ – *signs in the suns and moon and stars, nations in agony, bewildered by the clamour of the ocean and its waves* - echo the same kind of traumatic upheavals that accompany the key changes in our own lives.

And so we, the people of God, *still* find ourselves in the waiting of that in-between place. Watching and waiting. Caught between what is and the not yet; between the first coming of Christ and his second; between earth and

heaven; between the work that must be done here and the hope of glory. Now, setting our sights in joyful expectation is not some kind of wishful thinking. Hoping in the second coming of Christ is not something that excuses us from our obligations in the world. Our waiting is not the kind that sees us build underground bunkers and wait in hiding and isolation. Waiting for Christ to come is not about some aimless, vague dream about the future. It is not – and this is important – *passive waiting*.

Because in this in-between time we have work to do. And this work, of course, no less than the building of God's kingdom, God's reign on earth. Christ has left us that task as we wait for him. We are not sit around waiting for God to do the work. No. God's hands, feet, eyes, mouth in the world are ours. This holy season reminds us that God's Good News in Jesus Christ is for *all* people. Not just for people like us. Not just the people we like. Certainly not just for the people already in the fold. If are too settled, too comfortable; if our faith all seems so familiar, if we have given up on the challenge of waiting, then we have perhaps forgotten we are a pilgrim people, and that the desert is our home. Called to wait for Christ should always leave us a little edgy... The world around us wants to *jump past* the awkward times of waiting. See how distracted people are in queues. How many Christmas parties will be celebrated before Christmas!? But waiting in the awkward in-between place should disturb people of faith. The Gospel firmly reminds us that all the things we spend so much time and money and effort building and holding on to *will pass*. The *ultimate reality*, with the coming of Christ, is *yet to be*. So, while there is time, we are charged to then work on the things that truly matter.

Waiting for Christ places us firmly, whether we like it or not, in the in-between place. It reminds us we are not yet at our destination. And because we are not yet there, then maybe we shouldn't be so attached to the things we normally place so much value on. We are on the way, but we have not reached the place promised us by God. Bethlehem is but the start. For many people, their faith stops there – at the nice, the sweet, the cosy, the reassuring. But for us who set our sights also on *the second* coming of Christ, we say 'yes' to the discomfort and the challenge of living in the in-between place. Amen.