

Reflection on Isaiah 63 and Mark 13

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What is one thing for which you are waiting right now? A parcel in the mail? (Word is if we didn't post our parcels this week, they won't get to their international destination in time for Christmas.) A special event or gathering? Test results? Finding that suitable house and moving into it finally?

What word describes what the waiting is like for you? And what have been the gifts along the way?

This year, we know from firsthand, lived experience what it is to wait—not just as individuals but as a global community. We've waited, and are waiting, for...

- press conferences and updated news
- restrictions to ease
- borders to open
- a vaccine to be manufactured and rolled out

We wait... together... and apart. And our waiting causes a number of emotions and reactions that are as fluctuating as the tides of the sea. We waffle between hope and resignation.

Advent is a season of waiting.

Like the alarming scripture readings that always kick this season off, Advent shakes us out of our numb routine—that sense that the way things are is the way things always will be—or even need to be—that there is nothing left to hope for, no higher ideal or aspiration for which to reach.

The opposite of what this season seeks to impart, then, is cynicism and despair—both dead-end and deadly conditions of the soul. And an intentional observation of Advent as a season, separate from Christmas, with its own practices and mood, is a remedy to the deathblow of scepticism or temptation to give-in that can seep into our souls.

So today, amidst the poetry of the prophet and the apocalyptic writing of the gospel this message rings clear:

God works for those who wait.

Therefore, let us keep awake in anticipation.

The troubles of our lives and in our world cannot be healed, solved or calmed by our efforts alone. At this moment in history, all eyes turn to Pfizer and Oxford in hope of a vaccine. We look to companies and health departments to manage its production and roll out. We look to one another to take part in the future vaccine programme so life can be normal again.

While we might be confident in the good work of science and technology, systems and communities, even the smoothest of implementation will not eradicate diseases of the heart that crisis like COVID reveal. Nothing human-made can inoculate us from the human condition that includes ills such as selfishness, partisanship, prejudice, hostilities, fears and the ready acceptance of inequalities and injustices of all kinds.

Something more is needed than human invention and good will. Like people throughout the millennia, we yearn for something—or *someone*—to make a lasting difference in our lives and in our world. Something or someone to change everything.

Jesus came to a yearning generation whose hearts were poised on God. He was unexpected, surprising and mysterious. He made a difference not with grand schemes and the over haul of systems and regimes. Rather, he entered in quiet anonymity, calling into question our presumptions, disarming us with his infant powerlessness, shining a light on our beloved-ness with the incarnation of God.

It is this One for whom we wait, for whom we remain awake with anticipation. And as Noel Davis reminds us:

What we earnestly seek with all our hearts
reveals itself to us
when we are ready to see.

In speaking about Advent while the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams offered this reflection with which I will leave us today:

We know something of the difference [Jesus] has made to our lives as individuals, to the life of the Christian community, the Church, to the whole world. And yet there's more. We're still waiting to see what might happen if Jesus was allowed into our lives that bit more fully; that bit more radically.

So again for Christians, Advent is a time when we do a bit of self-examination. Have I allowed Jesus in yet? Has the good news really made the full impact it might make, or is my life still locked into old patterns, into darkness, into slavery, into being not at home with myself or God or with other people? It's a time of self-examination, of repentance indeed, facing myself honestly and saying sorry for the things that don't easily face the light. And it's a time of expectation and a time of hope. A time, therefore, also of quiet.