

Advent 2B 06/12/20

I don't know anyone who likes to wait. Whether it is waiting in line, waiting on a parcel to be delivered, or waiting for a prayer to be answered, waiting is not something we usually enjoy. What we sometimes forget is that there is a great deal of wisdom in waiting. This is why Advent is so important. Advent is a good time to learn about waiting because this season is all about waiting well. In this process of waiting for Christmas, Advent teaches us lessons about why God sometimes makes us wait.

Many of us never learn the wisdom in waiting because waiting is not always fun. That's why our culture is built around preventing this dreaded task — fast food, faster Internet, faster delivery, no waiting! We send a text and we love getting a text back instantly! We don't like to wait! We want what we want now! To quote the rock band Queen "I want it all, I want it all, I want it all, and I want it now". Sound familiar? Everyone wants everything yesterday!

We don't like being held up. This carries over into our spiritual lives. We want instant answers to our prayers. We want God to respond quickly to our needs. We want God to provide for us within our time frame and schedule. We have everything worked out. Everything makes sense to us. Why doesn't God just act? Let's get on with it. A quick game is a good game.

I am sure many of you are wondering what is taking God so long to answer, to act, and to move on your request! You have prayed persistently and faithfully. Scripture says, "Ask and it will be given you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be open to you" (Luke 11:9). You have asked until your throat is sore and you have knocked until your knuckles are bloody and yet there is still no answer! You are getting discouraged. You think, "Does God not like me? Does he not care? Is God angry with me? Is God really there?"

This may be hard for some of us to believe but it is because God cares for us and loves us that he often makes us wait. God always has good reasons for making us wait. Once we recognise these reasons it is easier for us to accept that waiting on God is not a waste of time. You see, this is why God is rarely in a hurry. He is usually slow in the way he operates. Regardless of how fast we want God to go, he will not go at our pace. He always has a good reason why he goes about things the way he does. We just don't see it because, well, we are not God!

So why is God so slow? Why does he so often make us wait? Discovering why God makes us wait is a game changer. It will become more important to you than anything you are waiting on God to give you right now. That may sound insane because you feel so desperate for God to answer you but knowing why God is making you wait will make all the difference in the world to your faith, relationships, purpose and pace in life.

One of the most important reasons God makes us wait is revealed through John the Baptist. John the Baptist was a remarkable man. He was the child of Mary's cousin Elizabeth. Crowds would go out into the desert and listen to him preach sermons full of fire and brimstone. Some would take him seriously. Others thought he was just entertaining. The truth is that God had called John to tell people to prepare themselves for God to enter their world in the person of Christ.

The people of God had waited and waited and prayed and prayed for a Messiah to come bringing hope and healing to the world. They had longed for it. They were desperate for it. John the Baptist said that this Messiah was indeed coming and he would fulfill all the promises of their faith. But before he came John had a critical message to give to the world then and now. He gave the same sermon over and over. It was this: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 3:2). "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him" (Mark 1:3).

"Repent" — that's an old-fashioned word. We think it means to feel awful about the bad things you have done. Tell God and others you are really sorry and ask for forgiveness. We may think, "Okay I get it. I just need to apologise to God and others for the bad things I have done. When I do then my prayers will be answered! I can get an apology speech ready in minutes!"

Hold on... That's not what repent means. The true biblical definition of repent means to turn away from the things that are not good for you and turn to God — to turn your thoughts and life to God. You may be thinking, "Well that's what I'm doing, isn't it? I'm praying to God and waiting for him. I'm turning to him to answer my prayer!" We will get back to that shortly.

"Prepare the way, make straight paths for him" — the image here is one of cleaning your house for an honoured guest. You clean every corner, making sure everything is spotless so the guest would be pleased to stay there. What John is saying is that we need to make room for Christ in our lives. We need to clear the clutter out and make our heart a place that Christ is pleased to dwell. What does this have to do with waiting on God and getting your prayers answered? Absolutely everything! We must get our hearts and lives right with God before we should expect God to answer us.

You may be praying to God for the right things but for the wrong reasons. It seems like a noble prayer to everyone else but you know it's about your ego, pride and impatience. You need to look really hard at your motives and ask, "Why am I praying for this? Is it about God or is it about me?"

I think you see where this is going. If you are someone who has been waiting for God to answer your prayer and you are desperate you might want to take a serious look at your life, your heart, your motives, and the reason behind your prayers. This may not be the reason why God is making you wait. There are other reasons why God makes us wait. All I am asking is that as you wait you think hard about where you are with God.

Listen to this life-changing passage from 1 John 5:14-15: "This is the confidence, this is the certainty you have when you approach me in prayer, that if you ask anything according to my will, I will hear you. And if you know that I have heard you—whatever you have asked for—then you know, you can be certain, that you will receive it."

We can have "confidence" in approaching God with our prayers knowing he will answer every one of them. But our prayers must be "according to his will." If our prayers are according to his will, we know he hears us and will answer us and we will like the answer. This assumes one big thing—that our prayers are consistent with God's interests and desires. If we find that our prayers are not, God will make us wait until they are. It is only when our lives are structured around God and his desires that our prayers will be what he desires.

The question is — this prayer you want God to answer so bad and you have been waiting for an answer to — is it really what God desires? Has it been grounded in an active relationship with him? Will it serve not only your interests but his as well?

Here is something to think about: If you think you are waiting on God, he might be waiting on you. God might be waiting on you to look at your heart and come back to him. You see, God loves us too much to always give us what we want. God sees the big picture and so often what we want is not good for us nor does it serve the interests of God.

God always has our best interests at heart — always. I know many of you hearing these words need to understand because you are praying for things and waiting on things that could have a far-reaching impact on your life. God is waiting for you to let go of it and put your focus back on him. Somewhere along the way you lost your focus on God and your prayers have been out of alignment ever since. He is waiting on you.

When I think of all of my prayers and all the times I have waited on God for things, I am more thankful for the prayers that God did not answer than the ones he did. In fact the phrase 'be careful for what you wish for' comes to mind!! My life and my joy is just as much a result of unanswered prayer as it is answered prayer. For some of you this Advent season may not be about waiting; it may be about God waiting on you. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton