

‘Waiting Idly By’ – A Homily for Advent I

Jeremiah 33.14-16

1 Thessalonians 3.9-end

Luke 21.25-36

One of my favourite performances of Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot* took place just before I moved to Australia in London’s West End featuring one of my favourite actors, Ian McKellen. The play ends with the principal characters, Vladimir and Estragon, exclaiming that they are about to leave and then staying exactly where they are. As the title of the play perhaps gives away: they are waiting. Indeed, the whole play is their waiting. But how do they wait, and what exactly is it that they are waiting for?

They wait by doing nothing. They just try to pass the time. There is no expectation in their waiting: it is idle, repetitive, futile. In the end, *Waiting for Godot* offers no real hope for the future, no expectation of a ‘newness’ that can break in and disrupt the boring structures of a rather mundane human existence. Vladimir and Estragon’s is a lazy kind of waiting, a waiting which is an excuse for not doing anything in preparation, because they don’t really expect Godot to come. And, sure enough, Godot, ultimately, does not come.

There is a danger here for us, too, that we can end up living in the kind of world where nothing new is really expected. We can hedge ourselves about in so many ways in order to protect ourselves: to minimise risk, and to preserve our sense of safety and security. We sometimes do this in our jobs and personal relationships; and we can do it with our faith, also. We can protect and cocoon our faith to the point where we are just ‘going through the motions,’ not expecting anything to actually happen or develop, not really expecting God to arrive.

If we do this we have reduced faith to ‘mere tradition:’ staving off challenge and keeping uncomfortable change at bay. But this kind of faith is actually no faith at all: in the words of W.H. Auden in his provocative poem *Leap before you Look*, “our dream of safety has

to disappear.” Advent is about dispelling these comforting and comfortable dreams once and for all.

The Gospel readings of Advent over the next four Sundays will take us on an uncomfortable and risky journey. We begin today, Advent Sunday, with Jesus warning his disciples to watch for his second coming; we will then go on to listen to the prophetic words of John in the Judaeian wilderness and on the banks of the Jordan over the next two Sundays. Then, the scene shifts to the Annunciation at Nazareth; and finally, we will find ourselves in Bethlehem, breathless at the birth of our Lord. Not for us the inactive, idle waiting of Vladimir and Estragon. Ours is going to be a dizzying journey, as we move ever onwards into that dark and dazzling light; as we prepare ourselves to celebrate the pivotal moment of human history, the Incarnation of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Our readings today set the direction of this risky and demanding journey, establishing our bearings on our journey into God’s purpose for humanity. The prophet Jeremiah speaks daringly of the coming of God with promise and redemption – a coming that will tear open the barren normality of what has gone before and cause righteousness and justice to once again be seen in the land. Here, in a world that is a creation ‘coming apart at the seams’, a new word will be spoken that will heal and restore. ‘The days are surely coming,’ says the Lord.

In similar vein, our Gospel today repeatedly warns us of the coming of our Lord. As usual with the gospels, Christ’s coming is shown by Luke, not just as a moment of blessing, but also as a moment of judgement: this coming will see ‘the heavens... shaken’ and will catch out many in a moment of surprise and shock. We too need to realize that Christ’s coming really is unsettling – disrupting and subverting our usual ways of doing things. The Gospel writers remind us that the Advent of the Lord is not just about comfort, but also about provocation.

Advent needs to become a time when we are preparing to be shaken up by this most momentous world-shattering event of the Incarnation: that the majesty of God Himself should be found wrapped in the limits of humanity; that the all-powerful should be found in

the most weak; that the greatest of victories will be found in utter defeat; that the reassuring observance of the letter of the law will be surpassed by the unsettling demands of the law of love. Our Lord's warning that this great event can come at any time – 'unexpectedly, like a trap' - stands as a powerful reminder that each moment in our lives can be a moment of Advent – in which the ordinariness of our world can be broken apart and remade by the deeper reality of Christ's activity and purpose. Are we awake to the promise and possibility all around us, or are we sleepwalking through life oblivious to what God is offering us?

So what will our waiting be like this Advent? Will it be merely 'Waiting for Godot': marking time, a mere 'going through the motions,' giving lip service to the promise of the future, but being content to languish in the boredom of 'mere tradition'? Or will Advent become a season of real expectation where we prepare ourselves to live radically, dangerously; to see our dreams of safety - whatever they are - disappear? The answer, of course, is up to you. AMEN