

Morningside

17/12 2017

Isaiah 40: 31. Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.

"Wait".

A while ago I took part in a consultation about the economic future of Malawi, a country of desperate poverty. Economists, politicians, diplomats, aid experts, theologians - it was a very high-powered process of investigation into the complexities of international finance and political pressures and moral principles which need to be understood if Malawi - or any third world country - is to live. One paper was given by a professor of economics at Glasgow University, and I will not forget his beginning. He said that when he left Malawi the week before something was happening which would be far more significant for the relief of poverty in that country than any analysis we could make or action we could propose : it was raining cats and dogs in Lilongwe!

Is that not a poignant, primitive, human picture? A picture of a whole people in the middle of the technological age waiting, waiting, for rain? Think about waiting. Think about Advent. Much of living is waiting. Much of believing is learning to wait.

In Advent little children open Advent calendars. Each day, each box, marks one step nearer. The boxes yet unopened show how much waiting still has to be done. In church we light Advent candles each week to show the waiting, the waiting done and the waiting still ahead. Little children can find it very difficult to wait; and adults should not laugh at that. The difficulties of children are as real as the difficulties of adults, and are felt as equally real. That they seem trivial to adults no more of an argument than is the fact that many of the difficulties of adults seem trivial to children. When grown-ups tell children sternly that they must learn to be patient, they are right. But they are wrong if they imply that waiting is always a stern business; and they are certainly wrong if they imply that they have themselves learned how to be patient. Perhaps adults need to learn from children, as Jesus used to say: and they need to learn from children the eager excitement of waiting.

There are other kinds of waiting, too. Other kinds of Advents. I know a woman whose only child died on Christmas Eve, and whose husband deserted her years later on Christmas Day. Can you feel what the days leading up to Christmas are for her? Indeed, for almost any bereaved person? Look around church this morning and realise for how many people waiting for Christmas is painful; how many would want to go to sleep on December 23rd and waken on the 27th. But it can't be done. And this period of Advent, with its refusal to plunge headlong into Christmas, recognises that very different kind of waiting, and lights candles in that darkness, and weeps with those who weep.

So the waiting of Advent - and we've only thought of two among the countless different waitings of these weeks, might be a sign of the waiting that is part of all life; and indeed of all believing. We wait for news, we wait for people. We wait for confrontation, we wait for disaster, we wait for excitement, we wait for death, we wait for God. The people of Malawi wait for rain. The lover waits for the beloved. The naturalist in his hide waits through the night for the first flight of the young owl. The scientist waits for the experiment and the result which will prove or disprove her life's work. The actor waits for the moment when all the preparation for the role is fulfilled, or wasted, before the audience. The patient is admitted to the ward, is handed over, and waits. The Christian kneels, and tries to pray, and waits. Death approaches, and all there is to do is wait. So much of what really matters, so much that gives dignity to human life, is waiting; and anything that Christian worship can do to help us learn to wait, is work well done. We ought not to gobble up the Christmas carols too quickly!

One of the best books I know about Jesus is called *The Stature of Waiting*. The argument of the book is that the gospel stories deliberately describe a change. In the first part of the story Jesus is all action : he heals and teaches and has authority. Then, when he is handed over, when he is delivered into the hands of those who will crucify him, it all changes; in the technical term he enters in to his passion. From that moment in the Garden of Gethsemane until he cries out on the cross " it is finished", all Jesus can do is wait. He simply waits. But it is that part of the story, so the

book argues, which reveals Jesus as truly God. It is the story of betrayal and crucifixion, the story of waiting, which brings us to the true heart of God. Growing into the stature of waiting is growing in to God. Learning to wait may be among the most Christ-like things you ever do. Advent teaches us to wait: perhaps that means it teaches us to be like God.

Our Advent reading this morning was a great word of healing and hope from Isaiah. When you are consumed with weariness; when you are overcome by despair, trust in God. *Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.* In Advent we wait in hope for God, whose day will come. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Much of living is waiting. Much of believing is learning how to wait. At that same Malawi consultation years ago another speaker was the Principal of an Oxford College. He told us how years ago a young man had turned up on his college doorstep after five years in Dr. Banda's jails. This was Chakufwo Chihana, later Vice-President in the new Malawi. The Oxford Principal told us "He survived the terrible waiting of these five years because of his Presbyterian discipline. I do not know anyone - although I could believe it of Nelson Mandela - who has dealt with adversity with less vindictiveness."

Advent is about learning to wait. And about learning how to wait.

Amen.