

# When It's Time – The Trouble with Waiting

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Waiting is not a natural gift that I possess. As a priest, starting Mass on time; a teacher, class on time; a psychoanalyst, a session on time; my hard drive is set at being on time. I have been shaped and therefore, when waiting occurs, as inevitably it has to, I feel like reaching for my blood pressure tablets. My late Uncle Frank, my mother's brother, used to visit us at home, in Rathfarnham, Dublin, when we were growing up. He would begin by telling us 'you will never guess who I met in town'. Then he began relating the journey, the weather, the prices of things, the shoes he sought, the shopkeeper's lineage, until my mother would ask, 'Frank, who did you meet?' His waiting to get to the point drew us all in to the story. Waiting at the dentist, the headmaster's office, the clinic, for the paper to arrive as you sit the exam, all bring their tension.

Handling tension stretches, as an athlete knows, the muscle: our spiritual muscle. In our own present day 'immediate' is the demand, we want it yesterday and now. We are losing the tension of waiting, and its benefit. Gratification, speed, target achievement, product, these are buzz words, of consumerism, which we sometimes buy into. We lose waiting. We lose being drawn into Gods' story of *Kairos*. Gardeners know the waiting game – that product is not all, and getting to the point is not the story – and Advent introduces us all to waiting.

As a visitor to Holy Hill, Skreen in County Sligo, I understand waiting, as I



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sit in the hermitage and ... wait, wait upon the Lord. 'I waited on the Lord and He stooped down to me', 'all creation waits with eager longing'. Scripture tells the story of waiting. Mary pondered all these things in her heart'.

Two spiritual books I read over the last decade, *God of surprise*, by Gerard W. Hughes SJ, and *The Underground Cathedral*, by Abbot Mark Patrick Hederman OSB, illustrate the activity that occurs while we wait. Teaching young Holy Communion children last year, during Mass, the meaning of the colour of vestments, red, for Holy Spirit and martyrdom, white for innocence, green for Ordinary time, purple for Lent & Advent, I learned about childhood recall and sharpness. At the following Sunday Mass I asked if anyone could remember the reasons for the vestment colours. One boy went slowly through each and hesitated on green. After a pause,

waiting, as he searched his recall, he announced to us all, parents and congregation 'green is for, when there is nothing going on'. He was right; it was as if, nothing, no thing, but all things perhaps, is happening. I love that scripture line, 'while you are awake, while you are asleep, my father goes on working'.

Namely, the prayers we make, in union with the Father, are working themselves out, not in *Chronos*, but in *Kairos*. Not in our time, but Gods' time. Waiting can be the tension between our time, our demand for product, getting to the point, and God's time, 'in the fullness of time'. My mother, when she was making some nice apple tarts, would be asked by us, her kids, 'Mom, when will it be ready', and her reply: 'when it's time'. When I was young my father would take me hiking in the Dublin Mountains, and as I got tired I would ask him, 'dad, when do we get to the top?' His answer 'soon'. Going there, instead of getting there, like in the poem 'The Journey of the Magi', where the journey is dependent on the waiting to get there, or in Becket's *Waiting for Godot*, the waiting is the play, pure and simple, not whether someone is coming or not. Advent is about waiting, it reminds us of *kairos*, we are not in charge of time, but the heavenly Father who watches over us. It is a reminder to us of the existence of the 'not yet', a reminder in our time.

But God's time is *kairos*, and waiting, it's inbreaking is the tapestry of that particular cloak of waiting. Waiting stretches the knitting to make it hold. Waiting, and the Advent readings, teach us that, although we know the story, there is a depth within it which we can only reach by waiting. So that Advent, and the waiting that it evokes, with all the tensions, is drawing us in, inwards, into what Gerard Manly Hopkins' refers to as 'Inscap'. Into another place, where waiting is about being. Saint Augustine attempted to describe what might happen in heaven, and this was his reflection, 'there we shall sit and we shall rest, we shall rest and we shall see, we shall see and we shall love'. In other words, we will wait, and hang out together. Just doing nothing. As a caption I once saw said, 'don't just do something, stand there'.

Happy Advent, enjoy the wait. Find someone to hang out with.

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