

Sunday, December 2nd, 2018, Advent 1

Readings: Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25:1-10, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36

Waiting Actively

Introduction

Waiting is unpopular, and usually considered a waste of time. For many people, waiting is an awful desert, between where they are and where they want to go. But from a Christian point of view, that is wrong, that is dangerous thinking. The French mystic, Simone Weil, to whom I have referred at other times, makes waiting patiently in expectation, the foundation of the spiritual life. Many would agree: not least those from whom we heard earlier in the service: Bloch, Rahner, Mandela and Aquinas.

So, let us ask the question, what would it mean to wait; or as today's psalmist puts it, to "wait quietly before God?" I want to suggest to you that this idea of waiting, even if quietly, is never passive, never docile, never complacent or resigned. In fact, I want to suggest that waiting, active waiting, has a number of components, a number of aspects, all of which are important to the Christian lifestyle. Let me list and explain them!

Active Waiting: Of What it Consists

First, active waiting means living as though the moment is full, not empty.

It is natural to think that God may do 'his thing', the 'the real thing' somewhere else, at some other time. In "active waiting" I trust that *my moment* is pregnant with possibility, because God is, contrary to the common assumption, always at work. I stay where I am...and I live out the situation to the full, whatever that is, in the belief that something hidden there will show itself. The focus is on the present. Believing something can happen now, here - and looking for that - waiting for that, discerning that. The moment, as I see it, might be boring, frightening, confusing or just tediously routine - but my question is what might God want to do with it anyway?

Most of you are well aware that part of my work experience has been with Latin American Pentecostal communities. Victims of discrimination, at the hands of brutal states, a defensive Catholic Church and a patronizing mainstream Protestantism, these people taught me much about how to live. Gathered each evening in their run-down chapels, rain dripping through the tin roofs, they waited expectantly that Jesus would come among them, transforming their spirits. But, this waiting had shortcomings, had deficits. While they expected God *in* the chapel, they had no similar expectation of God *in* the world. Their faith, as they often put it, was about "conversion out this world". This world for them was no more than a vale of tears, through which they were passing to the real thing: heaven. Over years as we sat together, we both changed. I learnt about faith that was dynamic, lived, not just intellectualized. They learnt that being faithful to God, was to dare to believe that even this world, this world that they had experienced as a tomb, could be different. In that growing belief, they began to re-engage with the world, fighting to transform it, to humanize it, to make a reflection of, an approximation to the kingdom. Reality became full no longer empty.

Second, active waiting means giving up all my [necessarily futile] attempts to control things.

My work in philosophical thought has left me with a very clear view of how we in the west think about God and ourselves. Modern western philosophy began with the idea of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel that we need to help God on His journey, otherwise he will become lost. It was not long until we came to the view that God is obsolete altogether: Marx, Nietzsche and others of the "merry band" saw our mission as to replace Him. The German Erich Fromm wrote an appealing little book to that end, called "Du wirst Götter sein" (You will be Gods).

But before we lament the apparent evils of western theoretical atheism, we Christians are not altogether very different. My experience in the Uniting Church over 40 years, has taught me how we live by anxiety. On the one hand, the clear majority of congregations, hold to the past because they fear there is no future. God appears silent, and our only option, as someone said to me, is to "hold-on". In desperation, we have become not theoretical atheists, but practical atheists, seizing control because we are not clear about what we can do. But – and this is the point – the stance of active waiting is about surrendering our delusion about control, and understanding that our days and our moments are full with possibility, only when we wait to see what things God will do: if we let Him, if we lend an ear.

Third, active waiting means practicing hope and letting go of wishes.

If "active waiting" is the foundation of the spiritual life, then hope is the foundation of waiting. Waiting rests upon hope. But hope is not about wishing, hope is of a different order. We wish because we want the future to go in a very specific direction. Hope on the other hand, is trusting that something of the kingdom will be fulfilled, but not just according to my wishes. Henri Nouwen, the very human and humane Dutch born Catholic scholar says, "I have found it very important in my own life, to let go of my wishes and start hoping." The statement almost seems a bit edgy, but it is tremendously meaningful. It forces us to a greater depth.

Reality is full of possibility. To control it is an exhausting delusion. To confuse it with our wishes, is narcissistic. The point is this: that if we dig deeper, letting go of our God pretensions, and allowing the dust to settle, we can ultimately see and sense more clearly.

And so, I wait.