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Roman Catholic Bishop of the Forces

Advent 2020

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is a great joy to return once again to the communal worship of Almighty God at Holy Mass, albeit in limited numbers. We continue to wait in hope and prayer for the end of the pandemic.

How we wait warrants some reflection. We have just emerged from Lockdown 2, patiently, or perhaps not so patiently, waiting for the pandemic to end. But just biding our time, on its own, is not enough. During lockdown people have needed to be cared for in hospitals and care homes, others have really needed the financial support they have received while yet others have yearned for and valued the simple companionship of a neighbour. So, our waiting has not been passive but active.

Such active waiting can be seen with the development of a vaccine. As a nation our resources and finest scientific minds are involved in developing an antidote, not simply waiting for nature to throw up its own cure. We have a role to play. Think also of the current logistical nightmare in arranging for millions of vaccinations. We have to make it happen.

For over 2000 years Christians have been waiting for the return of the Saviour. At the outset, the Apostles were locked down in the Upper Room, passively waiting for the Lord to return. It didn't take long after receiving the Holy Spirit that they realised they needed to roll up their sleeves to help usher him in. By living as He lived and taught, they started to prepare the way. Their involvement was necessary.

In fact, that is who we are as Church - the people who actively wait and prepare for Christ's coming. In Advent we wait for Him as we prepare for His birth; we also wait for Him at His Second Coming. In between these times the Church is the embodiment of our active waiting. In fact, the whole life of the Church is an Advent, a preparing the way, a rolling up of the sleeves.

Waiting for the Saviour is not new and we can learn what it means to wait from the ancient Jews. In today's first reading Isaiah talks of preparing the way. At the time of writing the Jews were in captivity in Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, the very place of God's presence among His people, and now the people were in bondage, waiting for a saviour.

When Isaiah exhorts the people to prepare a way for the Lord, he was being quite literal: to make a straight path, as short as possible, from Babylon back to Jerusalem, so that Yahweh, in His own time, could lead His people home.

About 500 years after the Exile the Jews are once again in captivity, this time to Roman rule, and there appears in the Judean desert the striking presence of John the Baptist. His message? Harkening back to Isaiah he cries: "prepare a way for the Lord!" He is telling everyone that the definitive victory is about to happen, the Saviour is coming to lead them home.

So how should we use our waiting time? Well, let's look to what the Saviour says and does once he works amongst us: He tells the people that the Kingdom of God is at hand - he is of course referring to himself. And what does he do? He gathers everyone to open table fellowship - saints and sinners alike; he forgives sins; he loves and commands us to do the same, He commissions us to make disciples of all nations baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Advent reminds us that we are invested in the coming of the Saviour. We have an indispensable part to play in preparing for His coming by living lives that lead to Him so that He may then lead us all to the Father.

This Advent as we wait, try thinking of two things: firstly, is there something I do which makes me walk on a crooked path? Name it and try and straighten it. Second, who do I know I can show God's love to and help lead them to our Saviour – offering forgiveness, listening to them, offering practical support?

Give it some thought and action so that your waiting does some work.

Wishing you all a blessed and holy Advent.

+Paul
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