

# Advent is not finite

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 29 November, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell

Advent 1B

Isaiah 64:1-9; Contemporary Reading: *There is dignity here*; Mark: 13:24-37

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

---

It is wonderful to be back together again, and worshipping in physical presence with each other. It is great to see you all, albeit with the relatively constricting protocols that are required. Whoever heard of worshipping without singing en-masse, of no physical contact of even a hand-shake let alone a hug, of cleaning everything after the slightest touch, and wearing these infernal masks to restrict our vapour particles while talking and breathing?

And what a timely coincidence that we regather after a long wait, and yet, ironically, we re-assemble to celebrate Advent, the season of waiting. Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and the call is to wait.

Advent literally means *towards the coming*. It is what we are called to do during the next four weeks; to look towards the coming of Jesus, the one whose birth we celebrate on Christmas Day.

And as we look towards the coming, we are instructed to keep awake. The last two words (that you see on your sheets) in Jesus' long discourse to his disciples were, "*Keep awake.*"

Debie Thomas writes on her blog, "Journey with Jesus", (and I was alerted to see this from Elizabeth Watson who reads Debie Thomas's stuff every week and I can tell you it's a very worthwhile blog to read). She said these words:

*"If the secular world speeds past darkness to the safe certainly of light, then Advent reminds us that necessary things — things worth waiting for — happen in the soft, fertile dark."*

This year, the world has learnt a thing or two about waiting ... for nine long months, the COVID-19 pandemic has tested the patience of everyone. In March, when the writing was clearly seen on the walls, there was the collective response to make immediate adjustments from our world of normal. Gathering for worship was normal as was meeting for a coffee at our local cafe. It was normal to gather with friends and family for a BBQ or for a home cooked meal. It was normal.

But normal left us, and we started our collective lament of asking the question of "*How long?*"

How long will the pandemic last, how long before there is a vaccine, how long before we can freely see loved ones and family living interstate and overseas – even the next suburb! How long do we have to practice social distancing or physical distancing protocols? For some, how long will the lock-down be, how long do we have to wear these infernal masks? How long?

And that is the lamenting question of Advent. How long, means that there is no anticipated end in sight when we ask that question. Advent time is not finite. Though we have the four weeks of Advent before Christmas, we are led to believe that the wait is over on Christmas Day.

But Advent waiting is the act of faith that need not reach the goal of Christmas. We need to live as if Christmas was ‘whenever’ – we don’t know when! Advent waiting is denying the secular need of certainty and time limits and tight schedules. Advent waiting is to discard the need for fulfilling predictable agendas and outcomes. Advent waiting is the call to forego the personal need of having a plan and a time limit.

The waiting in Advent is an end to itself. The waiting is the call that we are all called to. The waiting is the “called for” action with the understanding that we live in the time of the “not yet”. It is a gift that allows the truth telling of being prophetic and speaking out what is the believed truth, even if it is the lament of crying out to God: “How long God?” before we see and feel and breathe in your presence?

Debie Thomas continues:

*“I wonder if, years from now, when we look back on these bleak months of the pandemic, we will recognise these days of waiting - waiting for a vaccine, waiting for a cure, waiting for a return to our normal social lives - as paradoxical treasures. Learning to wait for God is akin to learning a new form of physical exercise.*

*Waiting is a muscle, and it has to be worked, toned, sculpted, and shaped over a sustained period of time. To sit and wait for God - not in bitterness, not with cynicism, not in fake and frozen piety - is serious spiritual work. But it is the invitation of Advent. Simply - to wait.”*

Soberingly, the first of December marks the anniversary of World AIDS Day that started in 1988. For those living with AIDS and those who know and love them, the cry has been “how long?” How long until there is a cure? How long do I have to live? The struggle to live with the disease continues.

The first of December 1955 is the date when Rosa Parks decided to sit on one of the front seats of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama after a hard day’s work. When asked to move to the back of the bus that was allocated to coloured people, Rosa Parks said that she was too tired to move, and so started another movement for civil rights in the USA.

She was quoted to say, “*No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.*” Rosa Parks lit another candle to live out the call of Advent.

Advent is not the prequel to Christmas ... it is not even about Christmas! Advent is an end to itself. The waiting is the call, not as some sort of discipline with the thought that it will end when Christmas Day arrives and we splurge on presents and food and drink and good company.

Advent is about not knowing when Christmas comes and whatever it is that we wait for finally arrives and reveals itself. Advent is the act of faith, of not knowing the when. It is about sitting in the time of the 'not yet' and continuing to be faithful, and not knowing how long.

Advent is about lighting the candle that we have lit – the candle of hope, so that even a small bit of light can pierce the darkness. It is about the smallness of our contribution – our individual contribution of offering light, without knowing how long we need to hold up the candle.

And why do we do it? Because it is right! It is the same as when Rosa Parks said, "*I am too tired*" and in her smallness of body and seeming insignificant action by saying "*I'm too tired, I'm not going to get up out of this seat*", she made a stance against the huge evil of discrimination.

Whether it is a small and single light, the smallness of our seeming insignificance will stand out. That is the call of Advent.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and it is a time to be still and to keep awake to what is happening around us. Yes, Advent is a time for stillness and silence. It is a time to watch and observe, and to read the signs. We do not know what is around the corner, and Jesus himself said that neither does he. But with Jesus, our humanness can only watch, wait and pray.

Many churches today will light one candle in the Advent wreath, with the readings about hope and peace. An additional candle is lit on the successive three Sundays, the figurative light in the darkness grows.

The single candle, though hardly making a difference to the lighting of this space, serves as a strong symbol of watching and waiting in expectation and hope through the dark times.

Advent is about waiting. We talk to our children about waiting to open gifts. There are though, heavier kinds of waiting. I find waiting tiring. It is tiring! Waiting for war to be over, waiting for an end to terrorism, waiting for an end to abuse, so that children and adults do not have to be afraid in their own homes; waiting for the hungry to be fed and the jobless to find work, waiting for people to sit at the negotiating table; and waiting for our political parties and leaders to actually care about our country than their popularity.

Jesus said, "*What I say to you, I say to all: Keep Awake.*" We are waiting, yes, but it is an active waiting. It is not sitting back and doing nothing. It is being pro-active. We look out for the movement of God, and even for the little things that make a difference in ours and others days.

And so we light one candle. The light pierces into the darkness. We stay awake, and we watch.

We are watching for any signs of God. We listen for the stirring of the Spirit, we participate in the life of justice. We are ready to catch the flame of this one candle and carry it wherever we go, taking hope to share.

This is the season of waiting.

This is the season of Advent.