

Now may I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Last week, Rebecca began her sermon by warning of the dangers of Advent calendars. They're open to abuse. It is possible, rather than opening one a day leading up to Christmas, to open up a whole load all in one go and consume all the chocolate in one sitting.

That's why I've always preferred to have an Advent candle than an Advent calendar. That's a candle with one to 25 written on the side of the candle, because you can't rush a candle. If you forget to light it one day, you can't suddenly quickly go to the two days. You have to wait for it to burn down. A candle always burns slowly. An Advent candle teaches us to wait, and Advent is a season of waiting. We need, like the candle, to learn to be patient. See how our epistle from St. James set for today opens, "Be patient until the coming of the Lord." We're to wait, James says, like the farmer waits for the crop.

We get lots of practice waiting, perhaps more than we would prefer. Who likes to wait? We spend an average, apparently, of 13 hours a year on hold, and the average person in their lifetime spends six months in queues. So no wonder waiting is something that we try to avoid, and yet the Bible encourages us to wait and be patient because waiting is not all bad. It has a positive aspect and that's what I want to address today, try to rehabilitate the notion of waiting.

On this Rose Sunday, when we think of Mary, the mother of Jesus, let's start by considering Mary, who at this stage in this story is still pregnant. Pregnant women know all about waiting. No woman has ever said, "I went to the doctor yesterday, he told me I was pregnant, and nothing's happened yet," because you can't rush being pregnant. It involves waiting, and in that context waiting is good. You want to wait the full nine months.

So saying that's what the point James is making about the farmer who sows the seed. He sows the seed, he doesn't go back the next day to see if it's started to sprout. He sows the seed and waits and prepares it till the appropriate time and the crop comes.

So let me spell out two important points about waiting. Firstly, waiting is not a passive activity. It's a time of active preparation. Waiting is not simply, in the biblical

sense, twiddling our thumbs and counting the days, just watching time pass. The pregnant Mary would be actively thinking and getting ready for the birth of her child.

James holds up as an example of a good waiter the prophet, Job, and we often hear about the patience of Job. Well, if you read his story, Job certainly didn't just sit around waiting for his suffering to end. He was anything but impassive as a whole series of terrible things happened to him. He railed against the injustice of it all. He complained to God and he got angry with his so-called friends who offered him advice. He didn't sit passively by.

Imagine a scene at an airport. There are two people there, late at night. One has gone into the airport to escape the cold and has found a nice corner in which to lie down for the night. The other person is there to greet a loved one who they haven't seen for a long time. They've got a bunch of flowers. They're pacing up and down. They're checking the arrivals board to see if the plane has been delayed. That person is waiting. The other person is merely loitering.

In Advent, we're called not to loiter but to wait. We're called to pay attention to the signs of the coming kingdom, to prepare ourselves for the coming of the King. James says, "Be patient until the coming of the Lord," and the word he uses there in Greek for coming is *Parousia*, which is a special word in that context, saved for the arrival of a monarch.

Do you know what they say about the queen of England? She can't apparently stand the smell of paint, because for her whole life, everywhere she's gone has smelled of paint because the people who're receiving her have painted the room. But it's a superficial preparation, a tarting up. Advent's a time to go deeper and reflect on these things and the things that we need to do to make ready.

Ruth Graham, wife of Billy, was once driving along the freeway and saw a sign which read "End of construction. Thank you for your patience." She said, as she saw it, that those were the words she wanted on her tombstone, and as far as I'm aware, she got her wish. We're all under construction. In Advent, we pause to ponder how that construction is going, that it's going the right way.

Rebecca said something else last week that I found very helpful. She said that Advent isn't just about waiting for the return of Jesus at the end of time. It's being aware of what that moment represents. That this world is already under the process of judgment and transformation, that God is already working his purposes out and establishing a new kingdom, a new Heaven and a new Earth, and the Advent question is, are we ready and are we joining in with this, preparing ourselves for the reality of what is to come and what is already here, or are we just content to mosey on in the material world around us?

Preparation doesn't just happen. It's active. I was running along Windansea yesterday. I say running. I'm sure another word is more appropriate. But anyway, I was going along Windansea Beach. There was a high tide. It was very exciting, lots of people down there, a good surf, and I saw a surfer with what I will always think of as the Advent look. He was a big burly bloke with a board under his arm, and he was looking out to sea, very determined.

He was looking out, but he wasn't just admiring the view. He's looking to see where the surf is, where the best breaks are. As he looks out, that whatever he determines is the best place, that's where he's going to jump in and paddle out. So his looking is determining the action he's about to take.

The Advent look is one of preparation, of paying close attention, of being ready to act. As we look ahead in this Advent season, we're looking like that surfer looked. We're to have an Advent look about us. We're not just waiting passively. We're not counting down the days till the kingdom comes, a kingdom that we know will be a kingdom of righteousness and justice. So let's be investing now in that coming kingdom. The future shapes our action in the present.

There's something else I'll say more briefly about waiting. Waiting is active and waiting always speaks of hope. Going back to the surfers, who I must find, I do like watching surfers. I find them ... I'll never get in the water myself, but I do enjoy watching them. I find them very inspirational, and in this context, I think they could teach us a lot about waiting. I've noticed that surfers know how to wait. In fact, much of the time they're so-called surfing, they're actually waiting. They spend much of their time just bobbing up and down in the water on their boards.

Now, they could do that on a lake, but that would be silly because you don't get waves on a lake and bobbing up and down legs akimbo is not the point of the exercise. That's not the end goal. They surf in the ocean as they hope to catch a wave. Their waiting is linked to their hope. When they're bobbing around in the ocean, they're paying attention. They're looking out for a wave. They're hoping there's a good break coming.

There's something there, too, which I think speaks to the Christian experience. Much of our life, we're spiritually bobbing around, waiting for something to happen, but we do that in hope. The psalmist says, in Psalm 62, "For God alone, my soul in silence waits." That's the psalmist speaking almost as a spiritual surfer, just waiting to encounter the God who is close by.

That waiting, that waiting on God, that turning to God in prayer, comes out of hope, comes out of the hope that God is near, and God, if we wait on him, will draw close to us and we will encounter him in our souls. Just as surfers pay attention to the movement of the waves, so we must strive to pay attention to the movement of God by his spirit in our lives. We wait in hope that God is close.

A surfer hopes to catch a good wave. That's the aim of the exercise, to get him or herself into a position of where that might happen. So they have to take their board not to a lake, not even to any old beach. They need to go to a beach with a good break. And so it is with us. If we're serious about waiting on God, we have to seek him. We have to pay attention. We have to put ourselves in a place where we might meet with God, like turning to scriptures, coming regularly to worship, being attentive and open to the God who is close by.

We wait in Advent in the hope that Jesus will come to us. He came, born of Mary, in Bethlehem. He will come again at the end of time, and he comes to us now by his spirit. Given that promise of his coming, let's seek not to loiter, but to wait. Let us be patient and wait well till the coming of the Lord.

Amen.