

Advent a time to listen, hear, prepare and respond

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Advent Sunday: Jer 33 14-16, Ps 25 1-10, 1 Th 3 9-13, Lk 21 25-38

I was listening to *Big Ideas* on the radio last week and heard a conversation between the wonderful cartoonist-philosopher Michael Leunig and Peter Catt, the Dean of St John's Anglican Cathedral in Brisbane. Michael talked about the way today's pace of life alienates us from each other. He said, *When people hurtle along, the soul gets very frightened and our anxiety levels go up ... and when the anxiety goes up the anger goes up and there's no time to listen.*

Then in his inimitable way as Australia's unofficial spiritual director, Michael offered us an antidote that he'd accidentally happened on last year. He'd said he'd missed a train, and instead of worrying about it, he thought to himself, *Hang on a moment, I can sit on the station in peace and wait for the next one. And now it works. I'm always trying to miss trains these days because I sit there and there is peace. And peace in this modern world is not a given.*

Have you ever thought of simply sitting and waiting as a cure for the social ills of our time? Michael's insight has made me think again about Advent, this season of waiting that we've entered today; waiting and preparing.

Advent has its roots in the experience of the very earliest Christians. After Christ's resurrection and ascension, they waited and prepared for Jesus's second coming. They believed he would come again in their own lifetime, and at his coming again, all the ills of the world would be cured. They remembered prophecies like the one we heard from Jeremiah

today; *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ... I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.*

But can you imagine the crisis when the people of the earliest church began to see fellow Christians dying? Where was he? What about the promise? *The days are surely coming when I will fulfil the promise.*

The first Sunday of Advent is the day when we remember that promise. But for us, the watching has not been mere decades as it was for those early Christians; it's been two millennia. We in the later Church have responded to the delay in Christ's return by redirecting our focus. Rather than looking for the healing to come at the end of all time, we've come to focus on our own personal end; our death. Of course, there are groups that do get obsessed with the end of time, but generally the Church hasn't gone down that path, but rather a more individual one. And realising our own end could come at any moment, we've commended living our lives better – living in a way that honours God's gift of our life. But that can also lead us to live as though there's no tomorrow; it can also engulf us in a ridiculous pace of life.

So Michael Leunig's idea of deliberately missing a train in order to find some peace and tranquillity isn't such a bad idea. But we live in a world where most people don't have the leisure to miss the train and hang around. Life is a daily struggle either for material survival or in many places even personal safety. That's been brought home to us again by the catastrophic fire events in Queensland and California; and by those schoolchildren who went on strike to protest our parliament's inaction on climate change. For them, the future obviously feels very precarious. They've reminded us that like the members of the early Church, we are also waiting in a

threatening present, and hoping for rescue from a terrifying future.

So do we roll up our sleeves and get busy, or do we sit and wait for God to do something? The answer lies somewhere in between. There's no doubt that God is already doing something. The stories that we so often hear – of unexpected help and care being offered to people suffering any form of catastrophe – are signs that God's gifts of compassion, grace and kindness are already active in the world. Why can I say this? St Teresa of Avila explains: *Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours, yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the earth, yours are the feet by which he is to go about doing good and yours are the hands by which he is to bless us now.*

Paradoxically, Teresa's wisdom is a call both to action, and at the same time, to waiting and silence. She was a contemplative – free to listen to God and to think.

We're not. We live in an age of instantaneous communication; communication on a relentless, industrial scale. We can be swiftly overwhelmed and paralysed by the number of calamities that call on our compassion. Yet in order to discern our own mission – the way Christ wants us to be his hands and feet and eyes – we also need space and silence to listen to him. God has provided enough compassion in the world for every need to be met. So what need is *our* particular compassion called to meet? We need time to listen, to hear; then time to prepare, to get ready to respond.

Advent *is* that time, and we must protect it. Otherwise for us, as for so many, Advent will be crammed with school / uni / work holiday busyness, end of year deadlines and windups, and the lunatic demands of consumer culture. We need time to listen to God; we need time to prepare so we continue to be Christ's hands, feet and eyes; so that we are not repeatedly ambushed by immediate and insistent calls which can gut us of

the compassion and resources needed for the next time. Drowning people will do that to others – any of us would in their situation too.

Silence and listening for God; these are two rare commodities in the type of world we live in today. And so in addition to Advent, it's actually significant that we choose to gather here regularly to wait on God and deliberately incorporate silence into our lives – or at least a lack of interruption.

My bad habit has been to turn an unexpected time of silence and waiting into an opportunity to do jobs that I haven't been able to get to yet. I *mustn't* do that. I must wait on the stillness. Michael Leunig is right. So when an appointment is cancelled or I miss a train, I should receive that unexpected time as a gift for listening and stillness and peace.

But what's the point of this stillness, waiting, listening, peace, preparation? Wouldn't you be better off finishing this job now so you're free for the next?

No; that's like running on a treadmill where something else controls the speed and the slope.

This stillness and listening as silence mean we're stepping aside to let God get on with things – in us, certainly. Human hands, feet, minds and eyes will still be God's instruments. But the vision, the power, the scope and the blessing will be from God. Things will change; life will flourish – you and I will run again, but with wild new breath.

This evening's concert is a fund-raiser for St John's Youth Services. Their amazing work has broken through the noise which once shrouded young homeless people in anonymity. Through the silence preserved in this place, Christ gave birth to St John's Youth Services; a carefully-considered gift of his care for the homeless, the outcast and the lonely.

So what might God be planning to call us to as we wait this

Advent? What might our renewed silence, listening and waiting
prepare us for? Amen