

4th Sunday of Advent C (2012)

Forty Martyrs'; St Bede

Advent is the season of waiting. This Advent we have reflected on waiting. We have had the help of 'an old atheist in a chasuble', a priest who has given up on God; and Mother Theresa who despite fifty years of silence from God did not give up on him. Like many she continued to wait through the silence, hoping that God would speak again, again reveal himself. We have also had the help of the biblical figures, Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth, and especially their child of old-age John the Baptist. All ended long periods of waiting and John had to wait upon God's word in questioning, unknowing. Faith, we have seen, is not 'believing without doubting' but rather believing despite doubting. In this world doubts will always be with us. Faith trusts amid the unanswered questions.

There are negative ways of waiting, which quickly lurch into anger, even when it is our fault that has caused the wait. This can overflow into rage towards anyone who is in the vicinity and can breed resentment and unhappiness across a wide orbit.

For many waiting is neutral, faced impassively. It is simply what you do. The poor are always left to wait. It is a common site in Africa to see workers waiting at a crossroads, in the chance that someone might hire them for the day. The poor must start queueing at the day-hospital or clinic before dawn if they are to see a doctor or nurse that day; For many waiting is a way of life. And the poor are always made to feel grateful that there is someone to wait for.

There is also a positive waiting, eagerly undertaken: the overnight wait to be first in the queue for Harrod's sale, or to obtain a ticket for a much desired music concert or football match. The lover is always willing to wait for the beloved.

A positive waiting is illustrated in today's Gospel-passage. Two mothers-to-be meet and embrace. The matron Elizabeth experiencing for the first time the womb-kicks of a lively boy and the young no-more-than-a -girl Mary, too early to show the child growing within her. Each supporting the other in the God-given, grace filled encounter.

And there and then John the Baptist begins his mission. In the womb he dances to announce the nearness of the Lord.

The waiting of pregnancy is anxious expectation. Only in recent times and only in the Western world has child-birth become routinely safe. Too often, for far too many, it remains a life-threatening experience for mother or child or both. And it is a painful experience most of the time. But the loving mother endures the pain for the miracle that is new, vibrant, noisy life.

For those of an atheistic leaning, those who, are enticed by the secularists' arguments the place to find God, to experience the presence of God is surely in a labour/maternity ward; the place of new life. It has long been my belief that God is most easily to be found among the poor. This is an idea that those who went to Lesotho are familiar with and would now agree with. Putting these two thoughts

together – that God is to be found in a birth and among the poor, then it follows that the place *par excellence* to see God must be where a child is born in poverty to parents who love and care for, and sacrifice for their child. Exactly what we see, what we wait to see, in a stable in Bethlehem.