

1st Sunday of Advent (A) 2013
Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

This Advent season we will be looking at the constituent words or phrases in a well-known sentence, that appears on the front of the newsletter: “Waiting in joy and hope for the coming of our Saviour”. This sums up our Christian's attitude to Advent. This is the period when we wait with positive sentiments for the celebration of our salvation.

We are all familiar with waiting. Usually, waiting has negative connotations. For most of us time spent waiting is wasted time. We queue at the supermarket, frustrated at the woman who places everything in her bags and in the trolley then can't find her handbag, and then cannot locate her purse. She seems caught out by the fact that she has to pay for purchases, and it takes an age and then some more. We wait in the traffic jam as the same piece of road is dug up for the fourth time in two months. As a nation we are good at queueing.

In our country waiting is an irritant. In some cultures it is a way of life. At traffic lights across the African continent men wait in the biblical way, hoping that someone will come along and hire them for that day. On my last visit to South Africa I went, again, to the Home Affairs Department in the centre of Cape Town. I sometimes think I grew up in the Home Affairs Building in Barrack Street. It has a reputation for delay, incompetence and the length of time it takes to do anything. When I first worked over there I applied for and eventually got permanent residence. This means I can stay in the country as long as I want and I get to use the “SA citizens only” desks at Passport Control, thus avoiding long queues. When I renewed my passport twelve years ago, I popped along to a sub-office of Home Affairs in the suburbs and someone looked at the stamp in my old passport and neatly placed a similar stamp in my new one.

This time, that is two years ago, I renewed my passport and popped along to be told, “We do do those any more; you have to go to Barrack St.”. A cold sweat gripped me. In Barrack St., first floor desks 33 and 34, I queued, for ever. Eventually I was at the desk. “Where is your certificate?” I was asked. “I don't have one. I don't think I have ever had one. I have been a permanent resident since 1994,” I pointed out -nearly as long as she had been a citizen of the world. “You must fill out this form.” I filled it I paid a hundred Rands and I received a receipt. Since then, following instructions, I have travelled with two passports, old and new and the receipt. I returned last January to Barrack St. There was a ticket system. How organised. You knew where you were in the queue. You could pop out and come back. As it happened I was quickly at the front anyway. “Oh, we are only up to March 2011,” I was told. We will be a few months before we get to January last year”. So I was back again on the last trip.

My first foray lasted only as long as it took me to establish the length of the line – huge; with only an hour of parking-time I came away. Two days later I was back, in

the early morning having done something I had never done before: I caught a train. There are reasons for never using a train but it seemed a sensible option for the time of day and so at seven am I was sitting on a new, quite clean train in Fish Hoek, a town down the Peninsula, waiting for it to depart from Platform 3 as they did every fifteen minutes the timetable said. The timetable lied. Twenty-five minutes later an announcement said the next train to Cape Town was leaving from Platform 2. The train was old and graffiti sprayed. But I had a seat and it chugged merrily up the coast, with few customers, until it hit the plain, the edge of the Cape Flats. Quickly it was packed. Between two stations the doors were open as the train rushed along and people clung on to anything they could grip, bottoms out in the air. I expected someone to fly off to oblivion at any moment. Then things settled down again. I recounted the adventure to friends later. "You should see the Khyalitsha train", they said in unison. The 'passengers' on the rush hour trains to and from this huge township/squatter camp, sit on the roof, they hang on to the engine ahead of the driver. On my return journey there were few passengers and many security guards, reminding me why I never caught the train. Gangsters regularly used to run through the trains robbing passengers at gun point.

Back at Barrack Street there was no ticket system. It had been abandoned. Who knows why? One queued as at confessions of old, moving up seat by seat. I was twenty-one in line. It took only just over an hour to get to the front and I gave my usual explanation. A big file was brought. All the 'R's. Nothing with my name. He even tried all the 'J's but no success. He then gave me two e-mail addresses and I await to hear anything from them. I expect to spend another morning at Barrack Street in the near future, engaged in Africa's most popular past-time – waiting.

Advent is the waiting season. Children wait for Christmas, and a deluge of presents. Grown ups wait for the excitement of the children to be unleashed. Christians wait for the celebration of our salvation. Advent is the season of Isaiah the prophet. He gives us the stirring prophecies which colour the daily liturgy with expectation. Today we hear how peoples of all nations will flow to Jerusalem to learn the ways of God. And with God in charge there will be no more war. Instruments of battle will be bashed into tools for farmers.

Our other readings today pick up the theme of the first weeks of Advent; reminding us that amid all our waiting, this world, this life is a waiting room for heaven. The image is Jesus' second coming in glory but that may await us on the other side of death. That is what we must await, and be prepared to face. Despite death and dying being all around us; although we know intellectually that it is inevitable, few seem to face up to the fact. How many have actually made a will, the most practical of preparations? How many have made funeral plans now to ease the burden of loved ones when they are struggling mightily without you?

Waiting is part of our worldly condition. As we wait, in traffic jam, or slowly moving line, what do we do? Is waiting an empty void? A gap filled with nothing but

blankness? As a person who counts punctuality as a divine necessity, I am always early for anything and so I spend a lot of time waiting. I try always to have a notebook and pen with me; and a small book or these days a kindle in my pocket. I watch people, and try to describe something about them in little word-sketches. And waiting is a God-given opportunity to pray. The rosary is an easy possibility; a reflection on a bible passage is not very difficult. For me waiting is a place for homily-ideas to emerge. And it is a chance for all of us to pray in intercession for all those people rushing about their tasks in such sweaty haste. After all, Thomas Merton, the great spiritual writer, had a moment of ecstasy on a city street, when he was overwhelmed with a sense of love for all those around him.

Advent is the season for waiting. But waiting need not be negative, when we remember what it is we are waiting for and when we wait in hope and in joy.