

John Docherty, December 10, 2017

“... the Lord is not slow about his promise, as some count slowness ...”

Those of us of a certain age – those who can look back at decades of experiences, rather than just a few years – will probably be able to relate to the sense that while one moment can seem interminable, the collection of moments tend to fly by far too quickly.

And while it is true that every minute is made up of 60 seconds, and every hour is made up of 60 minutes, I'm pretty sure that if I were to ask one of the younger members of the congregation what is the slowest part of the worship service, they would be able to tell you that some parts drag on more than others, even if time-wise they can be of nearly equal value.

The meditation compared to the children's story, for example ...

Life is like that – our sense of time is relative. When you're ten, the summer vacation lasts forever. When you're sixty, you wake up one morning and realize that the past year has slipped by without your noticing it.

I still have trouble getting my head around the fact that I've now been in a pastoral role at MFM for almost five years. For some of you that may also feel like it's gone by too quickly – for others it may have seemed like an eternity.

We're in the period of Advent, and we've been celebrating this season for the last 2000 years. It's a time of waiting, a time of anticipation, a time of wonder. When you're ten, the weeks leading up to Christmas are unending. When you're sixty, you wonder how you're going to find the time to do everything you need to do before the day arrives.

It's a time when we celebrate the anticipation of something that's already happened. It's a time when we try to put ourselves in the shoes of those who awaited the birth of the Messiah, in the person of Jesus.

In a way, it's also a season when we anticipate the parallel *return* of Christ, and the (literally) earth-shattering moment when human history is brought to a close.

This, too, is something that we've been waiting for, for the last 2000 years.

But from very early on, that impending return has generated a sense of impatience among the faithful, and Peter is only too aware of that fact.

“... do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand

years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

I think these two sentences capture, better than any others, the tension that has beset the Christian church since day one : the sense that Jesus could return at any moment, and the seemingly interminable delay in the fulfillment of that promise.

It seems quite clear that the early Christians expected Jesus' return imminently. They fully expected to see that happen within their own lifetime, and Peter's words to them seem to reflect that same expectation. He doesn't say “Relax ... it might happen tomorrow or in two thousand years, so calm down and don't be so impatient.”

No. He says, rather, “... while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.”

“... while you are waiting for these things ...”

He *does* say that “The Day of the Lord” will come like a thief in the night, but the intent is clearly that this could happen any day now. For those of his contemporaries who are reading his letter, the expectation is without doubt that they will not die before seeing these things come to pass.

And so, he encourages them to be ready; to live worthy lives; to be patient.

It does make me wonder, though, what difference it makes as to *when* this event is to happen. What real difference does it make to *me*, and how I live my life, whether Jesus returns tomorrow or a thousand years after I die?

Will I be tempted to slack off and live a more comfortable, less disciplined, life if I think I've got years ahead of me before things are, to use Peter's words, “... set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements ... melt(ed) with fire ...”?

Is there some risk, if I know that the Day of the Lord won't happen during my lifetime, that I will put off repentance until I'm on my deathbed, and then seek forgiveness when I can safely no longer enjoy my vices anyway?

Are we, generally speaking, so devoid of integrity that we will try to “game the system” in such a way that we will do everything we can to have our cake and eat it too?

I suppose, on a purely psychological level, that all of the above is possible, and perhaps even likely for many of us; perhaps even for most of us.

I suppose that the temptation to take the path of least resistance is so strong that we would all be in danger of just coasting along if we knew when the end was going to come. We might generally find it difficult to apply ourselves to the business of faithful living if we knew that we had time enough to enjoy life before taking a deep breath and resigning ourselves to getting serious about the things that really matter.

So, is that what God is doing?

Is God deliberately keeping us in suspense about the timing of history in order to keep us on our toes? Do we need this kind of manipulation to keep us in line? Are we *really* so depraved that we can't be trusted to do the right thing unless we have that niggling doubt that we might just run out of time?

I don't believe that to be the case, but there are certainly streams of theology that would seem to believe it.

As a child in the Catholic Church I know I had this sense that I was always on the edge of being sent to hell or purgatory. It was a given that we were all sinful and needed to regularly seek God's forgiveness. You couldn't take communion unless you had first gone to confess your sins to the priest. Ideally, you would go to confession just before Mass, so that you didn't really have time to screw up before taking communion, but most of us went to confession on Saturday night. After all, how much trouble could a ten or twelve year old get into overnight?

Unfortunately for me, I'm a bit of a masochist and a martyr, as you already know. I remember on one occasion going to confession, and getting my usual penance of a few Hail Mary's and a good Act of Contrition. I left the confessional and knelt in the back pew to do my duty.

After I stepped out of the confessional, someone else got in and started with their confession. There I was, in the back pew, within earshot of what was going on inside.

The person finished their confession, left the confessional to do their penance, and I slipped in again.

“Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It's been five minutes since my last confession.”

I don't remember what penance I had to do for listening in on the other person's confession, or what sin I thought I'd committed by inadvertently overhearing something I shouldn't have, but I *do* remember that as I left the confessional, the priest's door swung open a bit so that he could get a look at this kid who was yo-yoing in and out.

I've never sorted out in my own mind whether I think he thought I was a saint or someone headed for a life of crime and the hangman's noose.

But the prevailing sense I had was that as a Catholic, we took it for granted that we were sinners, and that there needed to be a way of seeking forgiveness. It, of course, included the expectation that you would try to mend your ways, but there was a recognition of the fact that there needed to be a mechanism for dealing with sin when it happened.

I don't remember ever hearing anyone talk about the return of Christ, but I stopped attending Mass in my early teens. It may have been a more present item of discussion for adults, but I suspect it was only really of interest to theologians, not the people in the pew. What was important to us ordinary folk, was the idea that when you died, you would spend some time in purgatory before being allowed to enter Heaven. The challenge was to keep the purgatory time to a minimum.

As I entered my late teens, I got involved in another church, and the prevailing sense *there* was also that we were sinners, and that there needed to be a way of seeking forgiveness. The understanding *there* was that once you'd given your life to Christ forgiveness was a done deal – God had forgiven you, and you could move on with your life. Sin, if and when it occurred, could be brought before God again, and forgiveness was yours.

So purgatory was out altogether – you were either going to go to Heaven, or you weren't. But once you were saved, the challenge now was to make sure that the word got out that others, too, could be saved.

Part of the challenge was also drawn from passages like the one we read from Second Peter : “... waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God ...”. The interpretation of that passage was that we are somehow responsible for acting in a way that will speed up Christ's return :

it won't happen until everyone on the planet has heard the Gospel and had a chance to repent;

it won't happen until certain things have come to pass, and we may have a role in laying the groundwork for those things.

If you've been watching the news this week, you've surely been made aware of the decision on the part of Donald Trump to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and to take steps towards moving the US embassy there.

Whatever the rationale for this step;

whatever the politics of the decision;

whatever the practical implications for peace in the region triggered by this move;

there are those who see this as part of the fulfillment of prophecy; as part of our "... hastening the coming of the day of God ...".

Personally, I can't help but hear an echo of the passage from Amos that we read just a few weeks ago :

"Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?"

That passage is of course directed at another group at another time in history, but I think it speaks to the arrogance of thinking we know how God will allow history to play out when it comes to our own sense of self-importance in "hastening the coming of the day of God".

I also suspect that God's sense of time is far more subtle than our linear, point A to point B vision of history.

That business of my listening in on someone else's confession happened fifty years ago. And yet, I still remember it quite vividly. I carry it with me, along with limitless other memories of events in my life that make me who I am today. They're a part of my past, but they're also a part of my now.

In two years, twenty-one days, twelve hours and fifteen minutes, I'll be eligible to retire and take my full pension. Not that I'm counting ... It's a part of my future, but it's also a part of my now. I am already vicariously living out how I hope to use my retirement years.

We're in Advent. We know the birth of Jesus happened two thousand years ago, but we relive the anticipation of it in these few weeks. It's a part of our past, but it's also a part of our now.

In the lead up to Easter during Lent, we know that the resurrection has already happened, but we enter into a phase in which we return to the period of passion and uncertainty. It's a part of our past, but it's also a part of our now.

When Jesus promised to return, he also told us that the Kingdom of God is within us. In a way, he was telling us that what is yet to be, already is. It's a part of our future, but it's also a part of our now. We should already be vicariously living out what it means to live in Jesus' presence here and now.

I suspect that the call to hasten the coming of the day of God is not so much a call to live your life in anticipation of some future event, as it is a call to live your life now, in the present, in celebration of the eternal nature of the fact that the Kingdom of God is already within you.

So ... what are you waiting for?