

John Docherty, Easter, April 5, 2015

"What are we waiting for?"

The suggested theme for today's Easter service is "Easter : We have waited for this." The focus is taken largely from the passage we read from Isaiah.

I have to admit, though, that my preparations for this Easter service have been largely coloured by my preparations for the Good Friday service.

In preparing for *that* service I was struck by the actions of the Sanhedrin in those last hours of Jesus' life. They, like all the people of Israel, are waiting for the Messiah. They are aware of the works of Jesus. They know that he is rumoured to be the one the nation is waiting for. They have him arrested in the garden of Gethsemane and ask him outright: "Are you the Messiah?"

One might assume that the question is a fair one; that either response – "yes" or "no" – would be acceptable.

If Jesus says he is *not* the Messiah that puts an end to the threat his movement poses to them. There is no more ambiguity; no more wondering. He is *not* the one the people have been waiting for, and the religious authorities can breathe easy. Their world will not be turned upside down. Not today.

The twelve disciples, and the many other people who have been looking to this Jesus for hope and leadership, can have their balloon burst with some finality. Jesus can be flogged as a troublemaker, then be let go; humiliated; crushed; broken. All the hype around this prophet from Nazareth can simply evaporate. The people can now just drift away, and wait for someone else to follow.

Or not.

If Jesus admits that he is not the Messiah, maybe they will just fall into a bit of a depression for a while then get on with the business of living, and give up this wild dream of freedom from the Romans and salvation in the world to come.

If he says he *is* the Messiah, then you'd expect the religious leaders to embrace him and get behind him. He'd already shown what he was capable of. He'd performed multiple miracles; he'd drawn crowds of thousands; he'd brought healing and hope. If he *is* the Messiah, if he really *is* the one sent by God to save the people, what's not to like?

Besides, if he really *is* the Messiah sent by God, how can you stop him? What level of hubris would it take to think that you can thwart the plan of God, even if you aren't entirely thrilled by what it might mean for you personally?

But they don't embrace him. They accuse him of blasphemy, because he basically says, "yes, I *am* the Messiah".

I suppose they might have thought he was too weak, or too unsophisticated, to be a Messiah. They'd had to deal with other revolutionaries who had stirred up the people, only to bring disaster on themselves and those around them. He clearly wasn't what *they* wanted in a Messiah.

So what *were* they waiting for?

In the passage we read earlier from Isaiah 25, verse 9 says

"It will be said on that day,
'Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.'"

This is the rallying cry of an entire nation, and it's been their cry for centuries :

God will not forget us.
God will send us a saviour.
God will deliver us.
We are waiting for a Messiah.

So what were the members of the *Sanhedrin* waiting for?

Why are they so eager to condemn Jesus and get him out of the way, regardless of whether he is the Messiah or not?

What *are* they *waiting* for?

As I was trying to get my head around this question, it occurred to me that a period of waiting can be a difficult time. It can be a time of impatience; a time of hope frustrated; a time of withering dryness.

We wait.

And we wait.

And we wait some more.

I suppose that if the wait extends for an extremely long time, in the case of the Jewish people of the time, a wait of centuries, there are a number of ways that one can fill that time.

I suppose some will have simply passively waited it out. Life is what it is, and you just hunker down and wait for the best. It's in God's hands, after all. Let's not waste a lot of time worrying about it. Generation after generation after generation would simply have gotten on with their day-to-day grind, waiting for the day when things would be different.

Some, on the other hand, would have occasionally been chomping at the bit to help move things on. The odd wanna-be prophet-slash-messiah would appear, get the people all riled up, try to kick out the Romans, end up being wiped out themselves.

Not too long before Jesus arrives on the scene, the Maccabees were the ones who fit the bill. In chapter five of the Book of Acts, there is mention of Theudas and Judas the Galilean.

So I suppose the Sanhedrin might reasonably be wary of yet another liberator who simply succeeds in making things more difficult for everybody.

But an extremely long waiting period can also be a time of relative calm; a time of stasis; a time when there is some risk that the thing waited for is forgotten or that the hope is lost. The pause imposed by the wait, then, sometimes sees the rise of those who become the "keepers of the flame".

But there are different kinds of "keepers of the flame". There are the occasional flare-ups we've already mentioned : those who seek to actively bring about the thing long hoped for.

There are those who seek to put in place the structures necessary to keep the hope alive. Or, if not to keep the hope alive, to at least keep repeating the message until the thing hoped for arrives.

Or not.

There are those who build institutions, and who then have a vested interest in protecting those institutions against all threats, even the threat of no longer being necessary or relevant.

And that makes me wonder whether the Sanhedrin, the religious authorities of Jesus' time actually wanted the arrival of a Messiah. Did they actually hope to find, in Jesus, the one they were waiting for? Or did they hope that the wait was not yet over?

Because if the wait is over, then it becomes time to act. It becomes time to mobilise and see change happen.

But there are also those "keepers of the flame" who hold on to hope, and pass it along to their children, and their grandchildren by what they say, and how they live their lives. Those who actually believe that that thing hoped for will eventually come, and who have the fortitude and courage to live their lives as though there were no need to wait any longer.

The suggested title for today's service, from the Leader magazine, is "Easter: We have waited for this"

The idea is that the people of God have waited so long for Jesus to bring salvation, and break death's hold over us. And at Easter, with Jesus' resurrection, we received the assurance of the promise of eternal life.

We have waited for this ...

No, we haven't.

Not one of us here this morning ever waited for Jesus to break the bonds of death.

Not one of us here ever waited for Easter morning to happen.

Not one of us ever waited with bated breath, wondering if Jesus' death on the cross was the end of a dream of salvation.

All of that happened already, two thousand years before any of us were born.

So what are *we* waiting for?

The disciples who walked with Jesus were surely waiting for something other than his crucifixion.

But they saw him die on the cross; they knew that his body had been taken and buried.

What were *they* waiting for after that?

Well, I suppose they may have been waiting for the authorities to come after them, now that their leader had been disposed of. They certainly weren't waiting for Jesus to rise from the dead. They'd completely missed that part of the message.

Once Jesus had risen, though, they were told they had to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

So they waited.

Not for long, all things considered. A few weeks, and then they were empowered to go out and preach the Good News.

And this Good News was to be taken to the ends of the earth, so that all nations might hear of God's offer of salvation.

One might assume a certain amount of time to be necessary for the accomplishment of *that* task.

So we wait.

The second last verse of this Book reads as follows : "He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

And so, for two thousand years, we have waited for Jesus' return.

I've participated in some churches filled with people who seem to be waiting with bated breath for the service to end, and I've participated in other churches filled with people who seem to be waiting with bated breath for one or the other of these endings : either the final accomplishment of the task of evangelism, or the return of Jesus.

Sometimes the understanding has been that one outcome depends on the other : that Jesus won't return until all people have had a chance to hear his message, so we have to really work on the evangelism end of things.

I don't want to belittle either of those hoped-for outcomes, but neither has fully resonated with me.

For one thing, this kind of understanding of what we're waiting for has too

often been used to turn a blind eye to the kinds of injustices that the legitimate prophets of Israel, prophets like Isaiah, railed against.

Why bother trying to change the way things are if it's just a matter of time before Jesus returns to set things right?

And if you think I'm overstating that position, I remember reading one of the letters to the Canadian Mennonite magazine recently, where the writer addresses the question of climate change : "... surely Jesus will return before we can destroy our planet, so why worry ..."

That kind of thinking is what prompted Karl Marx to suggest that religion is the "opiate of the people" – a means for keeping people subject to the status quo, in the hopes of something better to come.

And while I don't agree with Marx's reading of the value of religion, I can see why that reading would hold appeal.

Because we live in a world that is filled with challenges that surely can be met, and anything that prevents us from applying ourselves to the task at hand can easily be seen to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

But I'd like to think that we're no longer being asked to wait.

I said earlier that I think there are those "keepers of the flame" who hold on to hope, and pass it along to their children, and their grandchildren by what they say, and how they live their lives. Those who actually believe that the thing hoped for will eventually come, and who have the fortitude to live their lives as though there were no need to wait any longer.

I'm not sure I believe that we can expect this world to be a place where all of us live in right relationship with one another.

I'm not sure I believe that we will ever see justice done in all the areas where justice is lacking.

I'm not sure I believe that we can make of this world what God originally intended.

But I do believe that we are meant to try.

I'd like to think that we've already been given a model to follow in the life of Jesus;

that we've already been given assurance that death is not the final word on life;

that we've already been given hope that there is a sense to all of our efforts to live in right relationship with each other.

I'd like to hope that there is no, or very little, disconnect between what we think, what we say, and what we do.

And I'd like to think that we've already been given the green light to go out of this place, and live our lives faithfully, and to work at making this world the kind of place it is meant to be.

So, what are you *waiting* for?