

I Advent (b)
30 November 2008
1 Cor 1.1-9; Mk 13.33-37
Fr. Patrick S. Allen

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I'm not much good at waiting. I don't know many who are. We are, most of us, by nature impatient people. But you know, some time spent waiting is inevitable, so you develop strategies for dealing with it. I, for instance, never go anywhere without taking along something to read - *quietly*. Others, I have noticed, choose to fill those extra waiting minutes and hours in other ways, like, for instance, with extended conversations on their cell phones. We need a new Dante to describe the pains of an appropriately low ring of Hell just for such people.

But however we choose to deal with it, waiting is a fact of life. And actually, for Christians, waiting is more than that. Waiting is not just an inconvenient but ultimately inconsequential fact of life; rather, waiting *is* life. As we have seen these last Sundays leading up to today, the first Sunday in Advent - in the history of redemption, we live "between the times", between the "Already" of Christ's Incarnation, Suffering, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, and the "Not Yet" of his return, of history's end, of that "last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead," as we prayed in this morning's Collect.ⁱ

This season of Advent reminds us of where we are in history and what we are doing here. St. Paul makes just this point in an offhanded way as he prays for the church in Corinth in this morning's Epistle. Paul gives thanks for these Christians because they "are not lacking in any spiritual gift as [they] *wait* for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ." And our Lord makes much the same point, if with a slightly different emphasis, in this morning's Gospel lesson. Each servant is given his work to do, but it is work to be done in anticipation of a coming event, with an eye toward the future return of the Master.

Paul and our Lord are telling us that the primary activity (if we can call it an activity) of the Church's life is waiting, or at least that we should understand our lives and our life together that way: as waiting, as lived in anticipation, in joyful expectation, in the sure and certain hope of what will one day be - of what will one day be *but is not yet*.

Now, *Not Yet* - there's the rub. Because patience does not come naturally. Children fall into paroxysms of rage when told Not Yet. Teenagers role their eyes and heave exasperated and aggrieved sighs. Adults mutter and grumble and send snide emails to third parties. The elderly sniff with insulted dignity. But we had better come to grips with it, better learn to use it, because Not Yet is where we live.

So, how do we make our peace with Not Yet? How do we live our waiting in a manner that honors our Lord and takes seriously the promise of his return to judge the world in righteousness?

Recently I was reading about Paul Farmerⁱⁱ, a physician who has done incredible work among the world's poor, especially in Haiti. Dr. Farmer was asked how he avoided becoming discouraged when the problems he faced were so overwhelming and when so often a step forward was rewarded with a half dozen backward. Farmer began his reply by saying, "I have fought the long defeat."

The long defeat. Apparently the interviewer didn't know where that phrase originated, but I'm a little bit of nerd - maybe a lot of a nerd - and I knew exactly where that came from: the Elven queen Galadriel in JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In Tolkien's story, the elves are among the oldest and wisest of the

inhabitants of Middle Earth, and in one soliloquy Galadriel says of herself and the other elves, "Through the ages of the world, we have fought the long defeat."ⁱⁱⁱ She is saying that she and the elves have learned to see their lives and their world in Not Yet terms – that they have lived their lives in a world characterized by war and disease and the domination of the weak by the powerful, and yet nevertheless have struggled for peace and health and love. They have "fought the long defeat" and do not have, and have not expected to have, too very much to show for it. And she understands that what they do have to show, the victories they have won, are tenuous, precarious, provisional, and have inevitably lead to further struggle.

Tolkien himself in a letter explained what Galadriel meant, only he takes her point of view for his own, and not in an imaginary world but in this world. He wrote, "I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat' – though it contains... some samples or glimpses of final victory."^{iv}

Tolkien, well-formed Catholic Christian that he was, understood that the final victory of peace and love in this world must come from the outside – that is why it is called the Kingdom of God and not the Federated Republic of the Well-Intentioned. He understood that life "between the times" is marked (just as our Lord promised it would be) by "wars and rumors of wars."^v And here we understand "war" both literally and figuratively: there are terrorists gleefully firing into crowded Mumbai restaurants, and there are, just two blocks away from us, children dying of cancer; there are suicide bombers in Baghdad and, within spitting distance of this church, entire families crippled and ham-strung by addiction. Out there is violence, but in here – in this room, this pulpit, are ungrateful hearts.

But we are not surprised and we do not despair – neither of the fight outside nor the struggle inside. We stay in the fight. History is a long defeat. History needs – and has – a Savior, a Savior and King who has come among us once in "great humility," and will "come again in his glorious majesty."

And this is what Advent is for. It reminds us that we are a waiting people: anticipating, hoping, expecting, longing, watching. So that, when victories large and small do come – *and they do come!* occasionally peace does break out, in individual hearts and in families and in and between races and nations and cultures, and sometimes for generations at a time – when those victories do come, we are doubly grateful: first, because those victories are not expected, they are not ours by right; and second, because we see in them signs, glimpses, portents of the final victory of the Prince of Peace – for whom we Advent, Not Yet Christians watch and hope and long.

Even so, come quickly Lord Jesus.

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ⁱ Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

ⁱⁱ Farmer's work is chronicled in *Mountains Upon Mountains* by Tracy Kidder, which is on the booklist for Caritas Fellowship, our ministry to MUSC. I was reminded about Farmer, Galadriel, and "the long defeat" by Alan Jacobs writing at "The American Scene": <http://theamericanscene.com/2008/10/13/the-long-defeat>; these thoughts were very much spurred by Jacobs.

ⁱⁱⁱ "The Mirror of Galadriel" in Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

^{iv} Carpenter, Humphrey, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 195: "From a letter to Amy Ronald, 15 December 1956"

^v Mk 13.7