

St Mark's, Niagara on the Lake
The Third Sunday of Advent year 'A'
14 December, 2025
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

There's an hilarious sequence in Joris-Karl Huysmans' late-nineteenth century novel *En Route*, in which the hapless protagonist Durtal is vexed while searching Paris for a suitable church where he can attend Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve:

“He went to St. Severin, and found a young ladies' day school installed there, instead of the choir, who, with sharp voices like needles, knitted a worn-out skein of the canticles. He had fled to St. Sulpice, and plunged into a crowd which walked and talked as if in the open air; had heard there choral-society marches, tea-garden waltzes, firework tunes, and had come away in a rage.”

But it gets much worse:

“It had seemed to him superfluous to try St. Germain-des-Pres, for he held that church in horror. Besides the weariness inspired by its heavy, ill-restored shell, and the miserable paintings with which Flandrin loaded it, the clergy there were specially, almost alarmingly, ugly, and the choir was truly infamous. They were like a set of bad cooks, boys who spat vinegar, and elderly choir-men, who cooked in the furnace of their throats a sort of vocal broth, a thin gruel of sound.”

Poor Durtal didn't like what he saw and heard. His expectations weren't—or couldn't be—met. It's the same for us. Life rarely turns out as we'd hoped and dreamed. Our expectations are seldom met.

That's the point Advent underscores. It's about expectations which *aren't* met. Jesus wasn't what people expected. He didn't come at a time that was convenient, nor did he come in a way which seemed appropriate.

So much so that John the Baptist sent some of his disciples to him with an urgent question, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” That is, was Jesus the one John had been talking about, the political revolutionary with a winnowing fork in his hand who burns with unquenchable fire? Was he the Messiah?

True to form Jesus didn't give a yes or no answer. He said, “Go and tell John what you hear and see,”—namely that all sorts of infirmities were being cured and the good news was being proclaimed.

But he never said he was the Messiah.

Which doesn't mean he wasn't. It's just that he didn't look and act like folks expected the Messiah to look and act like. He was merciful, not truculent. Instead of bringing a revolution, he spoke of a coming kingdom which also didn't sound much like what folks were expecting, either.

Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?

Now, we all know the tragic and shameful part Christians have played for centuries in persecuting the Jewish people for not accepting Jesus as the Messiah. Right now, there are doubtless many preachers making some kind of claim that even though Jesus' own people didn't recognize him, *we* do.

But we don't. Though Jesus never called himself "Messiah" it's also true that despite the temptation—which is present throughout Matthew's gospel—for Jesus to call himself by our favourite ascription, "Son of God," he never did.

You see, Jesus called himself Son of Man, a peculiar title which is difficult to parse. It denotes simple humanity, of course, but also speaks of authority and even points to a glorious return.

Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?

All of which suggests that John's question is our question, too—and has been all along. In many ways it's *the* Advent question, too. "Come, thou long-expected Jesus," we sing. And we pray about his coming again in "glorious majesty." Yet I can't help if this imagery has taken hold of our spiritual imaginations because we really *are* waiting for another Jesus. One who comes on clouds with great glory to save us from the mess we've made of our lives and world.

Maybe that's because we're perpetually unhappy with the way things are—and the way we are, too. We're waiting for something better. The cultural excess of the season has conditioned us to expect getting a present that will finally satisfy.

Years ago, a bishop sent me a Christmas card with Athanasius's famous phrase "God became what we are so we could become what God is" beautifully embossed on the cover. Though the card was lovely, I thought it was aspirational at best and nonsense at worst.

Yet over the years, that statement has come to haunt me. I've learned how radical it is. Especially because for too long, the point of being a Christian—or so we assumed—was to go up to heaven. This assumption was so powerful that we began to neglect this world, or at least consider it a place we were simply passing through. Which isn't to say that we didn't do good and try to improve the state of things, but by-and-large,

Christian theology has pointed us away from this world. We've been waiting for heaven.

The thing is, though we might want to wait for a better world, we're called to *work* for a better world. Not only that, we've been called to be gifts to a world beset with misery and despair. Gifts of compassion, tenderness, welcome, safety, and generosity.

Yet what do people see from the likes of you and me who are called to this sacred work? Indifference, anxiety, torpor, selfishness, cruelty—and how much more. And they hear about a God who is as much over us as within us.

Which is why I'm haunted by that idea of Athanasius. And by how the Son of Man shows us how we become sons—children—of God by being an unexpected gift in the most neglected places. Hope in the most despairing. Love in the most hostile. Warmth in the coldest. Hope in the most wretched. Christ in the most godforsaken.

You see, heaven's here. Jesus taught that our work—our godly work—is to bring heaven to earth. Or at least to continue to bring it earth after his pattern and promise.

Durtal eventually abandoned his search and sought solace and diversion in the revels of *fin-de-siècle* Paris only to be found by the love that would not let him go. A love he'd looked for in all the wrong places—except his soul.

It was the love that sees beyond artifice and posturing—and even shame—to the person beneath. The love that chooses us despite our foibles and limitations. The love that awakens the Christ who sleeps deeps within. The love that finds us even when we stop looking.

The love we've been waiting for all along. We just didn't recognize it.