

Waiting in Hope

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Advent themes

I have always loved Advent in Carmel. There is a special atmosphere around the dark evenings when the Advent candle is lit in the Choir before Evening Prayer and we take up the liturgy that is proper to the season, a liturgy full of joy and hope in the promise of the coming Saviour.

The Advent themes of waiting, accepting, journeying and birthing are deeply human themes that find a special echo in Carmelite spirituality. The Order is Marian to the core, and it is Mary who is present above all in our thoughts and prayers at this time. She is the woman whom we contemplate accepting the angel's message, journeying to Elizabeth, travelling to Bethlehem great with child. Then we see her radiantly still, as if shimmering in a pool of silence, as she beholds her Child in the wooden manger that foreshadows the wooden cross.

Darkness and light, waiting and fulfilment, closeness to the humanity of Christ coupled with the infinite mercy of God, are all themes that we find in Carmelite writers, and which echo in our hearts as we listen to the Scriptures as the Advent and Christmas story unfolds.

It was on Christmas night that St. Thérèse experienced her definitive 'conversion', enabling her to change from a weepy, self-centred girl to one who began to go out of herself and think of others. It was just before Christmas that John of the Cross died at midnight, lonely and in pain, at the convent of Ubeda. For him, that night was to prove 'more lovely than the dawn' as he promised his brothers that he would be singing Matins that day in heaven.

Each one of us will have memories awakened by the celebration of Christmas. They may be happy memories or memories filled with pathos. But whatever they are, Christmas is a time when our emotions are engaged in a deep way as we see the Child in the manger and hear once more the song of the angels proclaiming peace on earth.

So this will just be a brief meditation on the theme of waiting as we prepare to celebrate the 'feast of feasts, when God became a tiny baby hung upon a human breast' as St Francis put it so tenderly as he set up the first crib, a living crib with live animals, in a cave at Greccio, so that people would realise that God is a God who is close, a God who understands us 'from the inside' as it were.

A waiting people

Israel spent generations, even centuries, as a waiting people. Israel was a people waiting on God's time, but God was also waiting for Israel to be ready for the next stage of growth. God does not force and coerce. God waits.

Without waiting we do not mature. Without waiting we cannot be ready for what follows on the preparatory period. Waiting in fact is a necessary part of the process of invitation and response. It is important in itself.

If we want to be in tune with the Divine, we too must learn how to wait. Abraham and Sarah had to wait until old age before they were blessed with their promised son, Isaac. It seemed to Sarah that there was no hope for her; in fact she even laughed when she heard Abraham's guests saying that the following year she would have a child (Gen 18:12). And yet the child was born at the appointed time, bringing joy and delight to his parents. The long wait proved to have been worthwhile.

The Israelites in exile in Egypt had to endure years of slavery, years of waiting and suffering, before God sent them Moses to lead them to their own land. Those years of long-drawn-out endurance were years that would increase their appreciation of God's gift of the Promised Land. But even then, the journey was not straightforward; it was a journey that took more than forty years to complete, and was not realised by the generation that set out from Egypt in the first place. As with Abraham and Sarah, God wanted the people to acknowledge that all was God's gift, not their own doing.

You shall remember all the ways which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger, and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your ancestors know; that you might learn that one does not live on bread alone, but on everything that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. (Deut 8:2-3)

Our Advent times

We all need times of waiting and expectancy in our lives in order to savour the joy of fulfilment. We need to live with the night and darkness before we can appreciate the coming of dawn. And this is written into nature if only we have eyes to see and hearts attentive to life's mysteries. The expectant mother must wait nine long months before she sees the face of her child. The seed must be buried and broken open in the dark earth before it can emerge into the light of day as a new green shoot. A project needs to mature from the stage of being a mere idea hidden in someone's mind to finding practical expression in reality.

We all have times of Advent in our own lives, just as in the liturgical season of Advent we remember the waiting of Israel through the ages, and the waiting of Mary as she carries her child in her womb. We are sure she will bring him forth once again on Christmas day for our contemplation, and we are ready to relive once again the story of the shepherds and the birth at Bethlehem. It is all so familiar and yet all so new each time Christmas comes round. And every year we are invited to reach a more profound depth in our own lives as we contemplate the birth of the Son of God among us.

The Carmelite writers love to dwell on the fact that we must wait until God's time for fulfilment. It cannot be rushed. We cannot wrest from God in a moment what God desires that we wait for. This is so that we realise that all is gift, 'all is grace' (St. Thérèse).

This cycle of waiting and birthing is not just a past incident in the life of a Jewish maiden who lived long ago in far away Palestine. It is a story that is re-lived in our contemporary world whenever a child is conceived, whenever there is a cry of joy at a long awaited birth, whenever there is a longing for liberation from

tyranny, whenever there is a gleam of hope and a striving for something beyond the obvious and immediate. And it happens whenever we ourselves rise to the challenge to bear Christ in our own flesh and offer him to our contemporary world; whenever we become, with Mary, Christ-bearers and Christ-sharers.

Edith Stein

Edith Stein wrote a beautiful meditation on the mystery of Christmas where she said that the whole of salvation history is summed up around the cradle. But it cannot stop there. We must listen to the words of Jesus and do his will in our own lives. The Lord in the manger is also the Bread of Life who feeds and nourishes us in our daily living, not something reserved only for special occasions.

Edith herself was received into the Church on New Year's Day, the feast of the Circumcision of the Infant Christ, a feast that linked her to her Jewish roots and enabled her to step forward with confidence and trust into her new life as a Christian. Her sister Rosa was later baptised on Christmas Eve in the hospital chapel of Hohenlind. Edith had recently broken her wrist and ankle and providentially was able to be present for Rosa's Baptism before returning to her Carmelite enclosure. In memory of the occasion Edith wrote a beautiful poem that expresses the pain that is often experienced in waiting, but also the joy of fulfilment that comes at the end. Each one of us lives through our own journey, our own pain, but we do so in hope and trust that the waiting is part of the picture and will ultimately bring us to joy and completion. It is part of Edith's poem that is offered here as a prayer and as a preparation for our own Christmas celebration this year.