



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

1st Sunday of Advent Year B

Longing

Readings: Isaiah 63: 16-17; 64: 1, 3-8, Ps 79, 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9, Mark 13: 33-37

You will forgive me if I repeat myself. Over the course of 45 years of preaching it is sometimes hard to remember everything that I have said and to whom. My best hope is that your short term memory is as compromised as mine and this will all sound fresh - if strangely familiar. I want to look, over the next sadly foreshortened Advent weeks, in a thematic way so that I propose to muse on Advent under the headings, LONGING, WAITING, EXPECTING and COMING.

For me Advent has always been the most wonderful season. I wish only that the Church year would dignify it with the same time as Lent, a full six weeks, and not be at the mercy of the Calendar.

Much of this affection is driven by the enormity of the period of Salvation History that it encompasses and the opportunity to retune our hearts to the glorious expectations of providence. Simply parroting that 'Jesus is the answer' without knowing what the question was is to miss out on the great journey of exploration that is at the heart of Man's quest for meaning, his origin, his end and his intended destiny. The

Advent Season is a chance to pause and overview that journey and the long road home.

Today's theme is that of 'Longing'. I am always a bit suspicious of reducing our quest to a response to our emotions. Emotion is a temporary thing and, while often an indicator, not always a good guide to truth. But LONGING is a constant, a necessary and inevitable part of our mindset and heart-set if we are serious pilgrims.

The definition of LONGING is 'an ardent and persistent desire'. It is not a transitory whim or sudden passion but a long drawn out focus of the heart on something desired beyond all other.

From the moment Fallen Man was exiled from Paradise, from the Eden where he was intended to dwell forever in the Presence of God, there has been, deep in his spiritual DNA a natural desire for that return. We are made in the image of God and thus our natural tendency is Godward and the hope of reconciliation and return. Advent reprises that journey out into the world, expelled by the whirling flaming swords of the Cherubim that guard the gates of Eden against our return and the possibility of us re-entering, seizing the Tree of Life and enshrining our sinful nature in immortality. And Advent, likewise, leads us on the shocking and wonderful path of God's plan for our redemption.

Thereon we will discover the glorious and terrible solution to our sin and exile in the person of Christ, the incarnate Second Person of The Trinity, the Eternal Word made flesh and the mystery of the Tree of Life disguised as the Cross on Golgotha.

It is this 'LONGING' of which St Augustine speaks when he says simply, 'Our Hearts are restless until they find their rest in You'.

Longing is the fervent and persistent desire for something seemingly out of reach. It is, in its ultimate context, the stretching out of the soul Godward.

We get hints of this in our secular lives from the little child who is set on a particular Christmas present and cannot get this out of the forefront of their minds. But we see in deeper matters the power of this Longing. Remember, if you will, the prophet Samuel's mother Hannah. Barren and desperate for a child she prays in the Temple. Her demeanour and her desperation as she pours out her heart to God are noticed by the priest who assumes that she must be a drunk. But that is a little cameo of what needs to be in our hearts on the journey, the passionate longing for God.

We encounter St. Paul, in his letter to the Church at Philippi expressing the conflict in his soul. He wants to go and be with Christ – which is the better option for him. But he knows that, for their sake, he must, for the time being remain. The Greek word for wanting to be with Christ is 'passionate desire'. It is, of course, just this passionate desire, this longing, that makes him the great servant of God that he is.

Many, many years ago, when one of my children was small, my father discovered that he liked the Beatrix Potter books. Indeed we had begun a little collection and looked forward to the next one we could buy. My father, in a fit of generosity, suddenly appeared with the gift wrapped, boxed set with its own special shelf. In an instant he had, inadvertently,

removed the vital ingredient. Instant gratification is no gratification at all. It dilutes gratitude and reduces pleasure. Instead of looking forward with longing, we are robbed of the effort, the saving, the preparing, the hoping, the whole shooting match of human maturing and learning value and acquiring wisdom. This is a trivial example but indicative. In this simple principle, writ large on the scales of history, we see, for example, that, while the great Exodus event was critical to salvation, the long years of becoming the People of God in the wilderness and longing for the Promised Land are also part and parcel of that journey of salvation. Longing stretches the heart, fills us with yearning for the eternal presence in the homeland of Heaven. Sees us reach out in love and joyful anticipation. Connects our little fragile human love with the overwhelming power of the love of God. Tunes us in to the infinite. Leads us ever on, thankful, yearning people increasingly in love with His love and that love overflowing our longing- enlarged hearts to the world. The question that is at the centre of this journey home is, therefore, are we lukewarm or are we aflame with longing, with ardent and fervent desire for Christ. As we walk the Advent Way with the great men and women of our faith we pray that we may be recaptured by that same passion that fired their earthly pilgrimage and that our hearts will be stretched out with longing for the One who is to come again in glory and who has, by His eternal sacrifice, re-opened the Gates of Eden and stands, arms outstretched, to welcome us home.