

### ***What Are We Waiting For?***

In the name of him on whose coming we wait, dear friends in Christ: In his first letter to the church at Corinth, the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter, the Apostle Paul gives that wonderful description of Christian love that pretty much everyone is familiar with. He describes this love with list of sixteen virtues that characterize it. And do you remember which virtue is first on that list? That's right: Love is *patient*. Patient. Full stop. Houston, we've got a problem. If there is one thing that we are most certainly not, it's patient.

No, we live in the age of immediate gratification. We want what we want, and we want it *now*. We *don't* want to wait for it. Got an ache or pain? Take a pill. Instant pain relief. Hungry? Swing through the drive-thru for fast food. If at home, pull it out of the freezer, pop it in the microwave, and nuke on high for few (seemingly interminable) minutes. Surfing the web? I'll bet you need a faster internet connection, don't you? Watching TV? Fast forward through the commercials. And they'd better get this crime solved in less than an hour before the show's over. No, we don't have a lot of patience. And things are only getting worse.

The other day I was listening to a radio program – one of those financial shows about wise investing. They cited a recent survey of high schools students in California. One of the questions was “Do you believe that you'll be a millionaire by the time you are thirty years old?” An overwhelming majority – something like 80% – said absolutely yes. For those who said yes, the next question was “How do you plan to achieve that goal?” By far the three top answers were: 1) by playing professional sports, 2) by winning the lottery, and 3) by being awarded damages in a big law suit. Now, landing a seven digit contract in professional sports *is* possible, but it happens to very few who have their hearts set on it, only a tiny fraction of one percent. And the odds of doing that are infinitely higher than becoming rich by either of the other two methods. The point to be made is that virtually none of them was thinking of achieving wealth the old fashioned way through steady hard work in a career, wise planning, and frugal living. No, they planned to arrive more or less instantly at the goal without any serious thought, effort, or preparation. And for the one or two in a hundred million that actually achieves it, it's doubtful that they'll keep it very long. Those who don't work for what they receive tend not to appreciate it, and like the prodigal son they waste it in reckless spending. To them it's easy come, easy go.

We see this same sort of impatience in our society with respect to the annual celebration of Christmas. It begins for most people the day after Thanksgiving even though at that point it's still over a month away. But that's when the decorations go up; the Christmas music starts being played everywhere; the parties, dinners, and special events begin; and the gift exchanges and all the rest of it start happening. And why not? Christmas is just about everyone's favorite time of year. So, why not stretch it out over a whole month? We know what's coming. What are we waiting for? Let's start celebrating now.

And no surprise, by the time Christmas finally arrives, we're pretty much Christmassed out. We are literally spent – usually in more ways than one. The biggest gains are to our waistlines, and so we have to pay for that too. And though our bellies are full, we are left with a feeling of emptiness. The full joy of Christmas that we had hoped to experience escaped us.

Why? It was due to a lack of patience. It was because we didn't do the proper preparation and take the necessary steps. And I'm not talking about hanging lights and baking

Christmas cookies (though, you can just run to the store and buy the latter now, and save yourself a lot of time and effort. They won't taste as good as homemade, nor will it build the memories of everyone working together on the project– but then that's a tiny part of my point).

The bigger point is that Christmas is first and foremost a spiritual holiday. During its twelve days we celebrate the coming of our Savior into this world. We celebrate his incarnation – the mystery of the eternal Son of God being born our brother in human flesh – for the express purpose of rescuing us from our sin and its just and terrible consequences.

And because Christmas is a spiritual holy day, it requires that we prepare for it spiritually. This is why the Church in its ancient wisdom has given us the season of Advent. It is, above all, a penitential season; a time of deep introspection and hopeful longing for deliverance. In Advent we are called to turn the spotlight of our focus not on all the festive things going on around us being pushed by a vain and impatient world, but rather on the depth and depravity of our sin, the darkness of our selfish hearts, and the cold and loveless ways in which we have treated others.

Well, that doesn't sound like much fun.

No, it doesn't.

Can't we just skip to the good part?

Not if you want to properly appreciate it when you get there. Not if you want to know the full joy of Christmas, and experience the wonder of God's love so great that he sent his Son to die for you.

The prophet Jeremiah in his book of Lamentations writes, "The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." Let's be patient. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's let the Lord do his work of preparing our hearts by confronting us with our sins, troubling our consciences with our offenses, and bringing us to sorrowful repentance. Your patience will be rewarded.

And if this is true for our annual observance of Advent, it's even truer for the greater season of Advent in which the Church has existed ever since the day of our Lord's ascension. Like the saints of old who awaited the birth and appearance of the promised Christ, we too await his promised coming. This coming will not be like his first when he appeared in humility and need, the babe of the virgin mother. This coming will be with glory and power. On that day the present heavens and earth will be consumed in fire, purified, and remade new. Sin and death will be done forever. For those who are unprepared, it will be a day of terror and destruction, the beginning of hopelessness that never ends. For those who are prepared, who lived in patience and constant repentance, it will be the beginning of an eternity of joy.

As much as we might like to, we can't rush ahead to that end. It will come in God's good and perfect time – unexpected, like a thief in the night. And if when facing difficult circumstances we ask, "What are we waiting for? Why can't all this misery and suffering that's going on in the world be over right now?" we are given the answer. "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." He is still adding to his kingdom those who are being saved. And you play a role in reaching them, by your witness, sure, by your sharing the Gospel of what Christ has done to save us from our sins; but perhaps even more by your

example of living a life of repentance that produces the fruit of repentance: namely faith, hope, and Christian love. Faith that holds steadfast to Christ the Savior in good times and bad, hope that longs for the day of his return with the confidence that it will come, and love that serves others with patience, kindness, and humility ... love that bears all things, believes all things God has spoken, that hopes all things he's promised, and that endures all things in patience.

This time of waiting is good. And I guarantee it because we have the Lord's Word on it: your patience will be rewarded. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***