

### ***Examples of (Im)Patience***

In the name of him for whom the Church on earth waits, dear friends in Christ: With Christmas Day now less than two weeks away, more and more we hear children expressing the sentiment: “I just can’t wait.” The reason, of course, is that they are eagerly anticipating the end to the mounting suspense and the opening of those festively-wrapped gifts that are accumulating under Christmas trees. But even though they say they can’t wait, the truth is that they can and they will. They have no choice. And being impatient about it won’t bring the day and hour any closer. All it does is make the waiting uncomfortable, less productive, and seem longer.

But the growing restlessness of the children reminds me that most of us aren’t very good at waiting – which is unfortunate because we spend so much of our lives doing it. Every morning we wait for the coffee to finish percolating, the toast to pop up, and the bathroom to be unoccupied. During the day, we wait in lines and for traffic to clear, and then we wait for quitting time so that we can go home and relax. We men who are married seem always to be waiting for our wives – who in turn feel that they are always waiting on us (though perhaps in a different sense). Then there are other things that we wait for on a grander scale. When we are very young, we wait for that big day when we can go to school. After that day comes and we’ve been there for a while, we look forward to being one of the big kids in the upper grades because it seems they’re having all the fun; but when we get there and find it’s pretty much the same old grind, we wait for the day when we can get out of school and go to work – until we finally get there and wonder why we were in such a hurry. At work we wait for promotions, or for the right conditions to begin planting or harvest; but after some time what we really start looking forward to is the day that we can retire and stop working. Even that wears off after a while, and it happens that in my line of work, quite often I meet with older people who are looking forward to nothing so much as to going home to be with the Lord. My point is that we’re always waiting for something. And specifically, what’s driving all this anxious and impatient waiting is the perception that whenever what it is we’re waiting for comes, things are going to be a lot better than they are now.

And that’s why it’s in times of crisis, when things are unstable and uncertain, and conditions all around seem to be worsening, and when we are personally suffering, and in pain, and in fear of not being able to hang on much longer that we are *especially* prone to impatience. At such times we look forward to the day of our final deliverance. And we ask, “Why does the world go on like this? How can the Lord allow so much suffering and injustice to continue? How bad are things going to get before he does something about it?” With the psalmist we pray, “O that the Lord would rend the heavens and come down’ to put an end to all this world’s wickedness and misery—or at least take me away from it all. One way or another, let’s get it over. I’m ready now”.

Which, when you think about it, sounds a lot like children saying that they just can’t wait for Christmas. And in response to this attitude of ours that keeps cropping up, in today’s Epistle, St. James asks us to wait with patience. And he encourages us to take as our examples of patience the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

And that sounds like a good idea ... at first, anyway. But the more I thought about it, the more I began to wonder. I mean, not all of the prophets were especially known for their

patience. In several cases, the opposite is true. Moses complained bitterly to the Lord, "Why do I have to put up with these complaining people and carry them like babies all the time? I'm not their mother!" Elijah got so sick and tired of not seeing anything good come of all his work as a prophet that he gave up, ran away, and begged the Lord to end his life. Sure, Job was patient for a while; but in the end angrily shook his fist toward heaven and demanded that the Lord come down and explain himself. Something similar happened with the prophet Habakkuk who told the Lord, "I don't understand why you're doing things the way you are, and I'm going to stand here on the ramparts of the city until you give me an answer to my complaint." Then there's Jeremiah, who, when things went from bad to worse in spite of his having faithfully delivered the messages that God gave him complained, "Lord, you tricked me! This is not what I thought would happen if I did as you asked." The prophets of God *were not* all models of perfect patience when they encountered difficult times. No, they were real people of fallen flesh and blood just like you and me, struggling with the same doubts and worries and lapses of faith that we experience. St. James' advice about looking to them (or at least some of them) as examples of patience sort of reminds me of something my father used to say. He said, "Everyone serves a useful purpose in this world; it just happens that some peoples' purpose is to serve as bad examples for the rest of us". Today's Gospel lesson is a case in point.

The story takes place sometime late in the first year of Jesus' ministry. He has begun to teach and heal throughout Galilee in the north, and he's gathering a fairly large following. Meanwhile, John the Baptizer has been placed in prison by King Herod. Herod had him arrested because he'd taken offense at some of the things John was preaching about sin and repentance. Specifically what he didn't like was what John was saying about Herod's *personal sin* of taking his brother, Philip's, wife as his own and *not* being repentant about it. That's the way it usually goes. You see, no one gets upset if the preacher talks about sin in vague generalities. And few people seem to mind when others are committing sins publicly. The crime that is considered going too far is for the preacher to point at someone in particular and say, "What you are doing is wrong."

But if you were with us last week when we heard some samples of John's fiery preaching, you know that he didn't pay much attention to such social niceties. Tact and subtlety were not his strong suits. No, John capitalized in straight shooting and brutal honesty. He had no problem telling it exactly as it is, and no one however privileged or powerful was exempt from his denunciations. And for good reason: his mission was to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord by calling people – *all* people – to repentance. And because we all naturally seek to defend ourselves, and justify our actions, and minimize our guilt, it's absolutely necessary that we be forcefully confronted by the Law of God with its demand of perfect obedience in order for us to realize that the call for repentance applies to us too. That's why John reserved his harshest words not for the obvious sinners: the crooks, criminals, and prostitutes; but rather for those who thought they were doing rather well in a moral sense. He wanted everyone to repent because he knew that everyone was under the wrath and condemnation of God.

And John had another reason for being forceful and confrontational: he knew his time was short. He didn't have time to mince words or beat around the bush because he was certain that the Lord whose coming he announced already had his feet on the ground. He was here: the one who would bring judgment on the earth, the one who would sweep away unrepentant sinners into hellfire and establish an eternal kingdom of righteousness. In fact, John probably became even more emphatic after he met Jesus and baptized him. He saw the Spirit descend upon him as a dove. He heard the voice from heaven announce, "This is my Son". He could now point to a particular person and say, "There he is. He's the One I've been telling you about. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." I'm inclined to believe that it was

knowing that Jesus had now begun his ministry that emboldened John to throw whatever caution he might have had to the wind so that he could now go straight to the top and denounce even King Herod for his sin. With the long promised Messiah here and at work, the end could not be far away.

Or so John thought ... but now here he was rotting in the hottest, darkest dungeon that Herod could have put him in. It was an ugly stone fortress in the eastern desert. It actually had a fairly nice view overlooking the Dead Sea – but it's doubtful that John had a room with a view. No, he was down in a pit of human-designed hell reserved for the worst and most dangerous criminals. And there he sat in chains waiting for the deliverance he was so certain that Jesus was about to bring.

But it didn't come. And with the passing weeks and months, he began to wonder ... and to doubt. Where were the fearful burning judgments upon the wicked he had spoken of? Where was the rescue and lifting up of the oppressed? What was Jesus doing, anyway? And when John heard through his disciples what Jesus was doing, he became even more impatient. He wasn't doing anything right. He wasn't raising an army. He wasn't stomping out injustice. He wasn't calling down plagues and fire from heaven on his enemies. He didn't even seem to have any enemies! One day he'd have dinner in the home of a tax collector, and a week later he'd be dining with a Pharisee – opposite ends of the spectrum. He worked miracles, sure; but he did them for Jews, Gentiles, Romans, and Samaritans alike. What was up with that? And nothing Jesus was doing – *nothing* – seemed even remotely likely to get John out of this stinking hellhole.

So John sent some of his disciples to Jesus with a simple question: “Are you *really* the one we were waiting for? Or should we be looking for someone else?” The question should make us all sit up and take notice. At one point John had been absolutely sure about Jesus. He saw with his own eyes miraculous confirmation of what he believed. He heard the voice from heaven. But now his prolonged personal suffering pushed him to the point of despair and unbelief. What this shows us is that even the best and most faithful – the one Jesus called the greatest born of woman – can crack under pressure and fall away from faith. Yes, as St. James says, consider his example, and be very concerned for yourself.

Impatience with the Lord and the way he conducts his business is an attitude of the heart that has the power to destroy godly hope and faith. It is, in fact, a form of self-idolatry because the root of it is this thought: “I want what I want. I want it the way I want it, and I want it *right now*.” It's a way of demanding complete control – the rights and prerogatives that belong to God alone. And when we are impatient with the Lord what we are really telling him is that we are not willing or trusting enough to leave things in his infinitely wise and loving hands. And that, my friends, was the sin that caused Satan to fall. By the sin of impatience, we show ourselves to be full partners in his rebellion.

But let us consider the whole example here, and not just a part of it. Jesus, who welcomed the repentant tax collectors and sinners, also welcomes those guilty of the sin of impatience. And he responds to John's inquiry with words that both condemn his doubt and strengthen his weak faith. “Go back and tell him what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” The kingdom you proclaimed *is* coming, John; it's coming right *now* – it's just coming in a way different than you imagined it would. Don't panic just because God's ways and his timeline are not yours.

John believed that Jesus was going to bring judgment on the world – and one day he will; but there was a lot more to God’s plan than that. He came first to seek and to save that which had been lost to Satan, sin, and death. He came first to “*strengthen feeble hands and steady failing knees, and to say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God will come ... he will come to save you’.*” Save you not from Herod’s prison in the desert, but from a prison far more hot and horrible ... where the worm never dies and the fire is not quenched. And oddly enough, he saves from that prison by bringing the fury of his judgment on the earth not on all those unrepentant sinners who rejected John’s warnings, who opposed and imprisoned him, but by taking that judgment upon himself. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world takes it away by dying as the sacrifice for sin.

John’s impatience came of allowing his present difficult circumstances to block his view of the bigger picture. He let himself forget that God’s plans are always much greater and wiser than we can imagine – and the same is true of us when in times of sorrow or suffering we too give in to the sin of impatience. And for this too, we are called to repent. And we can take this story as an example of how the Lord deals with our sin of impatience with his forgiveness and the strengthening of our spirits. And we can use it also to help us remember that regardless of what we see or experience in our lives, the Lord will fulfill his Word and promises to us. He knows what he’s doing and we can be sure that he will ultimately bring about the greatest good both for ourselves and for everyone else.

And for our best example of patience in the face of suffering, rather than one of the prophets who only foretold and pointed to the Lord’s coming, we should turn to the one to whom they pointed: the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep, who did not open his mouth to answer the false charges against him, and who offered his back, his hands, his feet ... his life for us. Who with utmost patience bore our sins ... and who is patient with us, not wishing that even one of us would perish, but that all turn to him and live. May we who have turned and been redeemed by his sacrifice seek to imitate him that we may wait in patience, hope, and faith for his return. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***