

Isn't it truly amazing how busy everything suddenly gets from November onwards. Last night I was talking to someone who has just realised that he is busy now up to Christmas Eve. And again I was talking to the guy who we buy our Christmas tree from every year, and he was saying that people are buying their trees earlier and earlier. It's almost as if people are trying to rush into the season of Christmas and not give it a chance to come round naturally.

Where in the midst of all of this is the season of Advent? Do we ever truly take this time leading up to Christmas and wonder expectantly about the Saviour's coming. Do we allow time to sit and wait? Or are you like me at this time of the year and wonder just when is life going to slow down. It's just mad. Where do we find time to sit and wait in such a busy season?

When someone is expecting a child, they have lots of ideas about what the child will be like: the colour of hair and eyes, will he or she be more like mum or more like dad. But then when a baby arrives, everything changes.

And that's what Advent should mean to us - we get ready, and when Christmas comes everything changes, it is so so exciting and life changing, or at least it should be. You see that's how you know our commercial Christmas is so fake – because all it does it make people spend a lot more money if they have it, drink more than normal, and then before you know it the shops will have moved on to the next thing to entice you in. It's so false. But you see once Jesus came into the world, things were never the same again – it was not only life changing, it changed history. But as we all know, Jesus was not the kind of Saviour that everyone was expecting. He was different. The people were expecting something else – a warrior, a King. And yet he was no prince, although we call him the Prince of Peace. And certainly no king, although we call him the King of Kings. He was born to working class folks. Not in a major city like Jerusalem. Not to a Rabbi. But to Mary and Joseph. He was brought into a family that had to move away, into exile, in order to protect their lives – they had no time to wait and wonder over the child.

The last prophet before Jesus came was John the Baptist. John was also known as the forerunner – he came just ahead of Jesus to prepare people for what was about to change the world forever. It's amazing how such an arrival would have such an impact on history – never to be replicated by anyone again. No one, not even atheists, can deny that Jesus has impacted history like no one else ever.

And our Gospel reading from Matthew says that John is in prison. Now John is pretty direct in how he prepares people for the Messiah's arrival – so much so that he has angered Herod and Herod's wife. And yet not even a prison cell is going to contain John at this stage. He wants to know what's going on outside. And so he sends word to Jesus, "Are you the one?" John needs to know whether the people are to still wait, or is it time to celebrate. John's not one for patience or waiting. He wants to know. He's kind of saying to Jesus, "Is it Advent or is it Christmas? Are we waiting or are we celebrating? If you're the one, you're not exactly what we had in mind. Are you the one?"

And that is a question for the whole world – it's a question that we all need to consider. We live in a world that celebrates Christmas, but gives very little thought to what Christmas is. And we are in real danger of passing quickly

from Christmas, totally ignoring Advent on the way, and moving swiftly into New Year party poppers before everyone's deflated as we all go back to work. Do we take the time to sit and wonder?

We've really got to take the time now before the turkey gets cooked, to wait and imagine the story as it unfolds. Because it is still unthinkable for us to understand that God came among us, not valuing the wealth and human comforts we value. God came among us living in a working-class home in an occupied country, and his idea of saving had nothing to do with conquering the Roman army. His purpose was nothing but love. And so how can we deny the opportunity to wait on something so magical?

And yet John had to check it was truly Jesus – his waiting could not be in vain. Jesus tells John's followers: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me."

You see, sometimes in our waiting we create a picture for ourselves of what we expect to see. And for the people, they got the surprise of their lives that the Saviour of Israel did not come with force. Rather he came walking, healing all that came to him and preaching the good news. And that is John's answer.

We are an Advent people. We have the great joy of Jesus, the Messiah. And we have been asked to wait for him to come again; to prepare and to wait. And from time to time, we will find ourselves asking, "Are you the One?" But most of the time we just rush through life. For me there is something missing if all we do through Advent is begin the celebrations, without considering whether we are truly ready for the arrival (not of the baby) but of the Saviour who chose in love to come into the mess of our world.

Christmas is popular, and has been grabbed and commercialized beyond belief. But not Advent. Waiting for the unknown is difficult. Celebrating is fun. But celebrations ring hollow when we don't know what it is we are celebrating.

And therefore I'd challenge you on this build-up to Christmas, that we take time out of the busyness, the madness, the distractions of festivities, and instead wait upon the Lord. Step out of the box of what typically we see in the manger scene of a little baby surrounded by family and visitors from afar. Wait upon God, and imagine the Messiah who will return some day.

If you're like me, you will find the process of waiting and being patient a very trialing ordeal. And so James' Epistle reading, at this time of Advent, may be the very words you need to hear. And with this I end. "Be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for his crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. Therefore you must also be patient". Folks the reality of life is that Christmas will come, but let's see if this year, each of us can carve in some time where we can allow Christmas to wait, and allow the buildup and expectation of why we celebrate Christmas to sink into each of us during this period of Advent. Amen.