

How do you wait?

I received a message this week which I'm going to tell you about. On Friday morning I got a text message that said this, "Your Royal Mail parcel is due to be delivered on Saturday 30th of January, between 7.45am and 11.45am." I got that by text, and then also my email saying the same thing.

Now, I guess that for a lot of us, a message like that has become pretty common over the last year. Lots of shops we usually use are shut, so we're buying more things online and getting them through the post. But as small a things as it might seem, for me a message like that starts a series of questions which can be quite big.

The first question I ask myself when I hear a parcel is going to be delivered is 'what did I order? **what am I waiting for?**' And sometimes the answer is obvious, but other times, particularly if the item has taken a long time to be sent, then I might really have to rack my brains for what it was I clicked buy for maybe weeks earlier. Usually, I remember, but the longer time it takes to arrive the more likely I am to forget.

Last year, when all the garden centres were shut, I ordered some plants online. In the absence of much else to do, I spent a fair bit of time on gardening last year. So, I bought these plants online, and the site that I bought them from had 'tracked shipping' – so I could see where my plants were on their journey to me. And again, in the absence of much else to do, I got quite into following my plants. The first time I looked they were in Holland, and the next time I looked there were still in Holland. And actually they were in Holland quite a while, but then another day I looked and they were in the UK, and then a day later they were in Chelmsford. And a couple of hours after that when I looked they were still in Chelmsford, and half an hour after that they were still in Chelmsford. And we'd go for our daily walk and come back, and they were still in Chelmsford. But then the message was, they are out for delivery. So they're on their way and after half a day more, they eventually arrive.

So, the second question, after 'what am I waiting for?' is '**how do I wait?**'. And the answer to that question is, impatiently. I wait by eagerly anticipating and impatiently expecting something coming which I think is going to be good.

As it turns out, I could have put that time to better use. Because the third question is '**what do I do when my waiting comes to an end?**' You see this big box arrived, and I'm excited and bring it in and open it up – and there's bubble wrap and paper that I have to get through. And I find the bulbs that I ordered, and that's fine because I know what to do with them, and there's some herb plants, which were a lot smaller than I was expecting, but that's fine, and then there was a small clear bag of soil.

And I have to say, I'm stumped at this. I didn't know what it was. So I look at the packing slip, and I look at the order that I made online, and by process of elimination I work out that the bag of dirt is, in fact, the asters I ordered – but not as the nice flowery plants I was expecting, but as roots. And I'm disappointed and haven't got a clue what to do with them, but I look it up and eventually work out what I need to do. And after weeks eventually from the pot I planted these roots in an aster plant grew and by about September there were flowers.

But I hadn't waited very well. I'd been impatient for my package to arrive, and had completely missed the chance to prepare for it, by understand what it was and what I needed to do with it.

So we've got three questions: 'what am I waiting for?', 'how do I wait?' and 'what do I do when the thing I am waiting for arrives?'

Through advent and Christmas, we hear quite a lot about waiting – the waiting for the coming of the Messiah. But for the most part the people that we hear about in the Christmas stories aren't so much waiting for the coming of the Messiah, but are completely surprised by it. The shepherds and wise men both get these extraordinary messages about Jesus' birth, but that all happens for them while they're going about their day jobs. Mary has to wait like all expectant mothers to give birth, but even for her the news that she is going to have Jesus comes completely out of the blue.

In today's gospel reading, though, we definitely hear about people who waiting for the coming of Jesus. Simeon, perhaps a priest, but definitely a righteous man, and Anna, a prophetess, have been waiting a long time for Christ. And I think their place in the gospel is really special, because it's not by angels or astrological wonders that they recognise Jesus as Christ – they are the first people in the gospel who recognise the coming of Christ through their encounters directly with him.

So, those three questions. Firstly, **'what are they waiting for?'** In both Simeon and Anna, we see people who have a definite sense of what it is they are waiting for. Simeon was waiting for the "consolation of Israel" - that is the comfort that would be brought to the people by the coming of the Messiah, and he is promised he will not die before he sees Christ.

'How do they wait?' Simeon, "righteous and devout", and Anna who "worshipped day and night, fasting and praying", aren't simply looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. It's not just that they're excited and counting down the days (and the passage tells us that they've been waiting a lot of days – and it's decades for Anna). In their devotion and their worship, they are active in their waiting, keeping themselves close to God, so that when the last question is asked they are ready.

'What do they do when the thing they are waiting for arrives?' All throughout the rest of the gospel, there are numerous stories of people not recognising Jesus, missing the point of who he is and what he has come to do. That is not the case for Simeon and Anna. They knew what it was they were waiting for. They waited well, by devoting themselves to God. And so, when their wait was over, they recognised Christ before them and could proclaim the who was and what he had come to do.

Although Jesus is only a baby, and seemingly much to the surprise of his parents, these faithful people, who had waited well, recognise that Jesus is the one who has come to transform the world, through his life and (and they're honest about this) through his suffering so that in the words of our Hebrews reading today, "He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death."

One final thing. We are in our world at the moment undoubtedly living in the fear and shadow of death. And we are waiting. Waiting for our vaccine. Waiting for our lives to be back to normal. Waiting to go back to work or school. We have hope and faith that all of those things will happen. But I'll ask those three questions, again. When it comes to the last year, and what we hope the world will be like in the future...

What is it we are waiting for?

How will we wait?

And what will we do when the thing we are waiting for arrives?