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Dear friends,

I wonder how good you are at waiting? It is certainly a fact that our culture over the last fifty years has made waiting something that many people never see the purpose in doing. Credit cards and the ability to defer payment through just a minimum payment give the illusion of the need to not wait. The adverts shout at us from the television, 'Have this now for Christmas! Pay next summer!' You would have thought as a society the financial crisis might have made us more cautious. Apparently not. Many people will go heavily into debt over the Christmas period simply because they cannot wait to have something, or cannot disappoint a child by saying, "We can not afford that item". Waiting is out of style.

It never ceases to amaze me how our society totally reverses many religious ideas. For Christmas is all about waiting. Not only waiting but also that lost idea, anticipation. For the people of the land of Israel two thousand years ago there had been centuries of waiting for God to do something extra-ordinary. How many people have their faith wobble or lose it because they almost demand of God that he do something, only to be met by apparent silence in response? One of the well known passages that is used in our Nine Lessons and Carols service comes from the book of the prophet Isaiah written around seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus. That is a long time to wait! We become impatient if we have to wait a week for something! The people of Isaiah's time knew that God would do something for his people and send them a special person. That promise from God was held for many generations before Jesus was born amongst the animals at Bethlehem to a young woman turned away from the lodging places all taken by those in town for the Roman census. Isaiah did not know the exact minutiae of the details, but he knew the import point. A son would be born to a young woman who would be the one expected from God. The prophet Micah said this son would be born in Bethlehem. If you come to either of the services of Nine Lessons and Carols you will see how the prophecies all come together in Jesus. The

waiting was over. The anticipation of centuries had been fulfilled.

Advent is the season leading up to Christmas and it is all about anticipation. For waiting implies we do not know when something will happen. Anticipation states that we do know when it will happen and can look to be ready. It does not take a young child long to realise that Christmas will be celebrated on December 25<sup>th</sup> and bring with it toys and gifts. I am pleased that from hundreds of people in our community, this period of anticipation of Christmas includes coming to church. Over the ten Christmases I have been here we have seen hundred of people at our special services. We have always been a little disappointed that there are far fewer on Christmas morning. For once the waiting is over, we should be in a mindset that wants to celebrate. With Boxing Day being a Sunday this year, if it is difficult to get to church on Christmas morning, this year there are three services on Boxing Day. We can celebrate together that the waiting and anticipation are over. All that is available from God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are God's gift to us. No need for anymore waiting or anticipation.

In our own Christian lives we can often be impatient in waiting for God to do something that may actually be our agenda and not his. St. Paul reminds us that as we grow in faith, so our desires and those of God for us should come increasingly together. He calls this having 'the mind of Christ'. We all need to pray for this to happen in our own lives.

I was talking with Phil Manterfield recently and we were trying to decide when Christians and Christianity had become marginalized in our society. It has been a slow and almost imperceptible change that has happened, almost without us noticing. In the last few years I have felt it locally that increasingly faith and the things of faith appear to be distant to the lives of many people. No one signed up for the Alpha course this year. Christmas is a time when faith and tradition still hangs on, with a large percentage of our community attending church. We welcome everyone at Christmas and throughout the year.

Yours in Christ, *Patrick*.