



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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WAITING

We hate to be kept waiting. When there is a big line at the grocery store, or when we get in one line at the bank and the others all move much faster, or when we are delayed in a traffic jam because everyone is stopping to look at an accident on the **other** side of the road -- we are likely to get impatient and angry. We resent having to waste our time, or as we are apt to think of it, having someone else waste our time. We feel that something is wrong if we have to wait.

What exactly does this mean? We may know people that rarely get impatient, and if so they are probably people we like and respect. Is that just a matter of temperament, or can we learn to be like them? Most of us would like to be able to wait patiently. We know how unpleasant it is to wait in line in front of someone who is angry about waiting. We've no desire to be like that. But there is often some distance between this vague desire to be patient and actually becoming so. Why is it that we hate to wait? Is there something about being Christians that will help us wait more patiently?

We resent having to wait because it is **our** time that is being wasted. It is ours and we want to spend it according to our own desires. So it is an imposition whenever we cannot do so. Impatience is a statement that **my** time is more important than someone else's -- trying to get ahead of another driver is only the most obvious example. Now, my time is obviously more important to me than someone else's. But do we believe that objectively (that is, in reality and as God sees it) one person's time (mine) is more important than another's? Are we not all in the same position? We may justify our impatience by thinking that what we have to do is important, presumably more important than others' activities. But since we are rarely if ever in a position to judge others' needs and intentions, we cannot really make that judgement. It is self-justification, an excuse for indulging impatience, no more.

Our Christian life is based on reality, not on our wishes. Comparing our time with others' is beside the point. The reality is that time is not ours in the first place: it is God's gift to us. Its use is committed to our stewardship, and we are responsible to God for what we do. This means not just that we are to give up being impatient. It is not just a matter of eradicating the vice. There is a more positive side as well: waiting upon God, being His servant, is an essential element of the Gospel. Christian life is not just doing lots of good things for Him, but waiting for Him in order to be ready to serve Him. The disciples were told to wait at Jesus' resurrection for the coming of the Holy Spirit. They were to wait for the power to come. They were not told how long (though it would be a matter of days); they were simply to wait.

Again, Jesus tells us that vigilant waiting is the attitude of the faithful Christian. The parables of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) and of the steward who bullied the Master's servants while the Master was away (Matthew 24:45-51), among others, warn us that we must be alert. "Blessed are those servants whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching." (Luke 12:37) In particular, we watch for the return of our Master. We believe that Jesus will return in glory. If so, we must be ready. Since this will occur at an unknown time, we must be constantly on the alert. We must always be ready.

Thus Saint Peter admonishes us, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." (I Peter 5:8) We are to learn to wait with vigilance, because we await the return of our Lord. His return is to include judgement, the final vindication of right and condemnation of evil. We long for this final resolution of things now so confused; we also await the judgment with a certain trepidation, knowing that we are not fully ready for it.

The waiting which Christian life requires is no purely passive thing. It requires constant attention, training and preparation. The wise virgins were those who had had the foresight to take the extra oil in order to wait for their lord should he be late. Similarly, our inability to wait patiently in mundane situations tells us that waiting is a skill that does not come easily or without effort. This is as true for Christian vigilance as it is for waiting in line at the supermarket.

Waiting is related to service. A waiter in a restaurant serves those who dine. The servant waits on his master. The servant's time does not belong to himself but to his master. Thus he waits and he serves. In this sense serving is waiting. Waiting on the master means serving him instead of self. In these days when self is so often glorified, service is thought to be demeaning to the servant, since the servant must place the other first, before himself. Yet that is what service is all about. Since it requires us to put self

aside and put Another first, it is of great help in our Christian progress.

As Christians we are to understand ourselves as God's servants. We are to obey every command, we are to do what He wants us to do. We are to base our lives not on our whims and desires, not on what we would like to do, but on what He has given us to do. In Scripture He has told us much of what we may and may not do, and we receive particular guidance (in vocational questions, for example) in our prayer and spiritual lives. Christian life must be ruled by obedience; we are to be good servants who obey their master.

Our service is not however degrading, though it is unquestionably difficult sometimes. Jesus served, taking the form of a slave (Philippians 2:11) in order to redeem us. Nothing of His humanity was lost by His self-giving service. Our nature is to serve God as His adopted children. When we serve self instead, we violate who we are. We steal what is properly God's. We lose our humanity when we are selfish -- and **not** when we give ourselves to service. Moreover, God is loving. In His commands to us, He requires only what is good for us. He is not gratifying His own whims, but is sacrificially seeking what is best for us. Thus our service is doubly liberating. For it frees us to live according to our true being, and it frees us to be remade in God's likeness, ready for heaven. Our service of God furthers our sanctification, and is the purpose for which God has made us. So we lose nothing essential to our nature nor to our Christianity by our service of Another.

Our service is also to be freely embraced. It is not involuntary servitude. This is the proper use of our freedom: to take upon us the yoke of God's service. To do that we must throw off the yoke of self-service. It is for God's service that we have been given freedom in the first place. So service does not contradict freedom: it is its proper context.

Service does imply dependence: the servant is the dependent of his master. So too the one who waits: his time is not his own. In our selfishness we resent service and waiting, for we do not like to be dependent. We would rather be self-sufficient and independent, feeling that we have the power to control our lives. But if we are Christians, we will give up such pretensions, preferring to be dependent on God. There is no other way. We cannot be Christians by ourselves, apart from Christ's saving work upon the Cross. We need to face this, and accept it -- and eventually rejoice in it. It is our true position (being dependent on God), and we often run astray when we try to do things on our own. It is the joy of our true nature and calling to be dependent upon God. But in order to enjoy it we must get over the idea that we cannot be happy unless we are independent.

Our waiting on God is the proper position for us to receive the bounty He would give us. Since we receive our redemption as His free

gift unearned on our part, we are always in the position of receiving. As we grow in faith and practice, we never leave the position of recipients of God's grace. Sainthood as we may become, we will always depend on grace for what we are. Our wills must cooperate with grace for our sanctification. But our cooperation is the active reception of what God would give us. This reception is not passive. It requires our well-trained will. The wide receiver catches the pass -- he is "only" the receiver, and will accomplish nothing without someone to throw him the ball. But at the same time, it takes special effort and training to catch the pass consistently, each time it is thrown. As Christians we "only" receive, but we cannot receive unless we will to do so, are trained to do so by practice, and are always ready and vigilant.

To receive we must wait upon God. We must give our lives over to being His servants. This requires a commitment to the moral life, for we will be unable to receive His bounty if we are still pursuing our old sins (or new ones). We will not be the faithful steward awaiting the Master's return if we are abusing the riches entrusted to us. Since our time is one of the greatest riches given to us, how we deal with the supermarket line and the impatient driver acquire supernatural significance. By learning to wait in small things, we learn also the habit of waiting which is essential to our relationship with God. By the same token, if we indulge impatience when driving or shopping, we will undermine our attempts to pray. Prayer and life are inseparable.

Our basic attitude of prayer ought to be one of expectant attention: waiting upon God. We will open ourselves to Him, allowing Him to do for us what He will, and allowing Him to speak to us as He will. We will be attentive, lest He speak and we fail to hear. A regular time of quiet is essential to a life of service to God. We will grow to delight in the time of waiting upon our Lord, for we will find therein (after much practice and perseverance) that for which we are made, and thus that which is most natural to our being. We will learn to live more and more for Another and not for ourselves. We will learn that true service is not merely activity in the world (good works), but something much deeper and more profound. It is in fact that service of waiting which transcends the conflict between activity and quiet.

In calling us to wait upon Him, God asks nothing of us that He has not first done for us. His Son came to us as a servant, a slave, that through His service (and His example) we might be reconciled to the Father. He served us in His earthly life. And now He comes to us as one waiting for us to turn our attention to Him. He calls us but He does not coerce us. He remains ready to serve us, ever attentive to whatever openings we might give Him. As He told the Twelve at the Last Supper, He is among us as one who serves. We are called to live in attentive service after Christ's example, in order that we might by His grace be made fit to serve Him forever in heaven.