

This is the last Sunday in Advent and Christmas Day is almost upon us. To me, it feels like we lit the first Advent candle a couple of days ago – I do not know where time goes to, but it certainly seems like it's going there faster. I think this has something to do with the fact that our contemporary society has become one of immediate *wants* – not needs, but wants, which are a very different thing. Half the stuff we surround ourselves with we don't need. My brother – now moored in Richards Bay, just north of Durban – is a cradle Catholic like me, baptised as a baby, but – not quite like me – he gave it all up as soon as he could. However, he lives as simply as a saint: if he doesn't need something, he doesn't want it – and spending a lot of time on his boat, sailing the world single-handed, has taught him the importance of only having what you need – everything else would be a waste of space. This makes it very difficult knowing what to get him for Christmas and his birthday; the last present I gave him – at his request – I ordered online and sent it by courier. It was a set of No 3 70mm Swedish piston hanks – I don't even know what that is – but it made Tony happy because he *needed* it.

All these *wants* that we have are immediate: they have to be met and satisfied *now*. Queuing used to be one of those things that the English did best, in a lovely orderly manner – now, queueing just makes people grumpy. On the other hand, with exquisite irony, those things we really need – like a doctor's appointment or to speak with your bank – you

have to wait forever for. Last week I rang Addenbrookes to cancel an appointment I no longer needed, and when I got through to the appointments office, first I heard a lot of Johann Strauss, then a severe-sounding voice said: ‘Thank you for waiting. You are 15th in the queue.’ And that was a *need*, not a want.

All the mystics speak about living in the ‘now’, the present moment. It is one of the keys to the spiritual life. Most of us, most of the time, live in the past or the future: our thoughts and feelings are focussed on the ‘no more’ or the ‘not yet’. We seem entirely unaware of the present moment, of ‘now’. The 17th century French Carmelite Brother Lawrence called an awareness of it ‘practising the presence of God’. Lawrence was a 17th century Carmelite lay brother in Paris who described living in the present moment and practicing the presence of God as the same thing. And he said: “The most holy and important practice in the spiritual life is the presence of God – that is, every moment to be happy that God is with you. (...) It isn’t necessary to have great things to do. I turn my little omelette in the pan for the love of God.” This echoes what Therese of Lisieux said more than two hundred years later: “Even if you pick up a pin for no other reason than the love of God, you will have done a great work.”

Our society isn’t interested in small, ordinary things: it screams for celebrity, for fame, for public adoration. And it isn’t interested in waiting, either – its wants must be satisfied

now – but Advent above all is a time of waiting. It's a time of waiting, keeping still, being small, aware and patient. The Lord Jesus tells us again and again in the gospels that the Kingdom of Heaven is a process of slow growth: of hiddenness, fertilization and growth. All the metaphors he uses for it are about seeds and sowing, planting, growth, nourishing; even when he uses the images of a costly treasure, it is still buried in a field and the merchant has to wait and sell all he has, and come back to uncover it. The Kingdom of Heaven begins in the dark, in the earth, in smallness and hiddenness.

So, if you have people you love – children, family members, dear friends – who seem to be uninterested in anything spiritual, who have given up the Church or religion (like my brother, who is in every way a good man), don't be worried. They are living Advent lives, but they don't know it yet; they are passing through their own inward Advent season, but they haven't quite realised it. Don't fret about them. They will be fine: the seed is still there, buried in the soil of their soul – all it takes is waiting and patience. That seed will grow and it will become a tree.