

Fr Andrew Fenby

Waiiiiiit for it! Wait... Wait... it's so difficult to do. Isn't it? Even if it's waiting for something that holds little interest that you're not particularly looking forward to, say like a sermon. Or the dentist. Or the Queen's speech (sorry boss). Waiting is a torment. It's so awful for us that if we're stuck waiting for the bus too long we might throw all caution to the wind, take our sanity to our hands, and start talking to someone else in the queue. We hate waiting that much. We hate it. Nobody ever sang 'Why aren't we waiting?' or 'I quite like waiting'.

Perhaps this is why church turns all princess pink this time in Advent because having a go at the Rector for donning a pink dress relieves the boredom of waiting for Christmas. May I just say, as I've been treated to such nonsense all my life hey, I'm not going to be fazed by anything you can throw at me from that direction. So don't bother.

Back to waiting. If we were cats, we would never catch mice: we simply don't have the patience to wait for the little furry demon to emerge from its lair. Some hate waiting so much they will ensure that they are never, but never early. This means timing your getting ready precisely, running round panicking at the last minute, and careering out the house seconds before the bus is due. This stresses out the sponge you married no end, but at least you never have to wait.

Human aversion to waiting is not a conclusion I've cooked up on my own after 10 years being married to Mr Can't Wait Won't Wait. It's all there in tedious and highly repetitive detail in the literature if you really want to read it, and if you don't want to waste your time reading it, then don't worry, I've read it so you don't have to.

When economists belatedly discovered psychology some time in the 80s there were suddenly a whole host of experiments to see how people responded to the notion of waiting. There are many variants, but basically every experiment would run something like this. Your subject is asked to make a choice. They'd be offered something like £10 today or £15 in a week's time. What would they choose? What would you choose? If you're like everybody else, which you are, almost all of us, always go for the £10 now. When experimenters varied the figures- like £9 today, £15 in a week's time and so on- it's only when they got to something ridiculous like £1000 tomorrow or a poke in the eye now that people went for deferred gratification rather than instant.

There's a more fun but also crueller version of this experiment (the fun and cruelty may be connected) which is to place a child in a room with a marshmallow on a plate in front of them. Say 'you can have two marshmallows in 15 minutes if you can wait and don't eat that one'. Then you leave the room. When you come back the marshmallow has miraculously disappeared. Pretty much every time. Older children get better at waiting than younger but only marginally. Fifteen minutes is no time at all to wait for twice the sticky gooey pink satisfaction, but we just can't wait. We want it all. And we want it now. But if we have to wait, well we'll do without it all and just take whatever you've got now.

To the weird world of academic economics, these experiments were a revelation. To earlier economic thinking £10 now rather than £20 later is entirely inexplicable. One marshmallow now rather than 2 in ten minutes is illogical. Economic theory has always rested on the assumption that we are rational creatures, willing to forego today to receive a bigger reward tomorrow. Which is probably why economists have always been close to useless. Until very recently, they were making the basic mistake of assuming that human beings are logical. All you have to do is look at Thursday's election result to see that that isn't true.

What it is, is our instinctive patterns of behaviour haven't really changed from when we first stood up on two legs, picked up a stick and started hitting each other. Our brains haven't caught up with the complexities of the modern world. Our instincts were fixed in the days when we were living hand to mouth- which to be honest has been most of human history. It's very hard for us to override the hungry ape that wants to shove whatever it finds into its mouth as quickly as it can in case someone else eats it before they can or something else eats the ape while it waits. That, and, in order to wait we have to stop and think, which is too much effort.

So. Our instincts don't like waiting. Our brains don't like thinking, and we have to think about waiting. So we really don't do waiting.

All of which (got there in the end) looks like very bad news for religion. Not just Christians waiting eagerly in Advent (you are aren't you?), but all faiths which feature an afterlife. Which is pretty much all of them.

People will always try to pick on their opponents weaknesses, such as Diane Abbot's mathematical skills or Boris Johnson's relationship to the truth; for rotweiller atheists, the afterlife is religion's Achilles heel. You know what? They're not wrong. The

world to come has always been one of the most problematic of Christian doctrines, always been the one that most needed handling with care, always been the one that was a little too slippery. You start with the best motives of trying to cheer people up, trying to comfort them in their misery with the thought that things will get better, even if it's in heaven. The best of motives. But if you're not careful, really careful, it might just start to be the case that you end up holding out the promise of a better life later in order to distract from a wretched life now, numbing the pain of this vale of tears with the opium of the people. Before you know it you'll be marrying the Bishop of Derry and cranking out hymn verses like

“the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate,
God made them high and lowly, and ordered their estate.”

You're at the bottom of the heap now. But don't worry, there'll be jam for all tomorrow.

Jam tomorrow. Excusing all sorts of injustices now with the promise of sunlit uplands to come. Jam tomorrow. One of the most damning indictments of religion in general and Christianity in particular. Jam tomorrow. Don't worry if I've got most of the jam today and you have none, because you have spiritual jam now and jam in abundance tomorrow.

Jam tomorrow.

That is the accusation.

For followers of Jesus, our response to this charge is clear:

Not guilty.

Christianity is not 'jam tomorrow'. It's jam tomorrow **and** jam today.

We must fess up: we're not always as good at today as tomorrow, because we have to make the jam today ourselves. But Christianity is not offering more later if we have less now, not saying our suffering now will pay dividends in the Kingdom to Come.

Because.

The kingdom is already here. We're not waiting any more. We've been given the instructions, the chart is in our hands with the route clearly mapped out, and the time is now. The Kingdom of God is among you, not unknown years down the line.

So. John the Baptist. Scary old wild man John the Baptist, the voice calling in the wilderness, calling out wrongdoing and calling us snakes. Scary old wild man John the Baptist, telling us about the world to come, about the one who will come after him, the one with the winnowing fork in his hand, the one who will baptise with fire and the Spirit. But It's not the fire next time, not a conflagration of the future. It's blazing now.

The one John foretold came straight after him. For a brief moment they were both walking the same ground, both lighting the way. But once the future came, John's light was extinguished; John grew less. There was nothing more to predict, nothing more to wait for. Because the future had arrived. The Kingdom of God is among you.

Listen to John's teaching:

To those who have "*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.*"

To tax collectors: "*Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.*"

To soldiers: "*Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.*"

That's not jam tomorrow: that's jam thickly spread today.

The kingdom is already here. We're not waiting any more. We've been given the instructions, the chart is in our hands with the route clearly mapped out, we have the recipe for jam and the time is now.

Don't wait for jam tomorrow. No time to wait: start making it now.