



Homily for the Funeral Mass of Sr. Mary Clare Smyth
Poor Clare Convent, Much Birch – 1 December 2017

Even though there are two more days to wait until Advent begins I am so pleased we had that Advent hymn at the beginning of the Funeral Mass for Sr. Mary Clare. *“Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free”*. And during Advent we shall sing other Advent hymns also: *“Lo, he comes, with clouds descending”* as well as *“Come, Lord, quickly. Come Lord, quickly. Come, Lord Jesus Come”*. The four weeks of Advent leading up to the celebration of the birth of Jesus at Christmas take us right to the heart of the Old Testament, when the Jewish people were convinced that God would send a Messiah, a Saviour, one who would restore the kingdom of Israel and their Temple worship. Expectation and hope are the foundations of the work of the prophet Isaiah. *“O Come thou Wisdom from on High. O Come thou Root of Jesse, Come. O Come thou key of David Come”*. But in all their hoping and praying, the People of Israel couldn't comprehend that God would send a Messiah who would not just tell them about Himself. Their prayer would be answered by *“Emmanuel, God is with us”*. In the words of St. John's Gospel *“The Word of God made Flesh”*. Jesus himself that Word incarnate.

We, too, keep Advent as a time of expectation and hope. It is a season of watching and waiting. It is an exploration of seeing and believing. It isn't a time of day dreaming because we are people living in the middle of a complex world and living lives which are different on 1 December 2017 than they were on this day even a year ago – to say nothing of the 101 years of Sr. Clare. *“Take the waiting out of wanting”* say the advertisements in the shops, not least on Black Friday! During this Advent, and at this Christmas, we *“Wait in Joyful Hope for the Coming of our Saviour”* so that He may speak to us at this time, in these circumstances, in this place.

It is in this place that Sr. Mary Clare has *“waited on the Lord”*. Whilst many people think that waiting is a waste of time, the conviction of contemplative life is that no time is wasted in which God is served. The service of God is the sanctification of time. In her contemplation, Sr. Mary Clare looked back into history, a history of which her long life played a huge part. She prepared to celebrate the fact that Jesus was born into human history two thousand years

ago, at a specific time and in a specific place. In faith, she believed that Jesus would come again “at the end of time” to judge the nations and each individual human being. Another Advent hymn echoing the Dies Irae:

*To thee, O holy One, we pray
Our judge in that tremendous day,
Preserve us, while we dwell below,
From every onslaught of the foe.*

But of course, “the end of time” is now. Every moment of every day is the end of that time, never to be repeated. The grace of the present moment. Mother Teresa of Calcutta reminded us that we are weaving on earth the fabric of the coat that we shall wear in eternity. Jesus appeared in history certainly. He will come at the end of time truly. Our daily Mass and Holy Communion is the sacramental remind that Jesus is with us, and in us and around us here and now at this time. “The Body of Christ “. Amen – I believe.

The great Anglican spiritual writer, W.H. Vanstone, spoke powerfully of “The God who waits”. He said that God himself has chosen to wait on us, to be a receiver of our attention, to place Himself in our hands. But we have to be prepared to give time to the sights and sounds and signs of God revealing himself in the most unexpected ways, sometimes through the most unexpected people. Looking beneath the surface, looking beyond the immediate, searching deeper than the obvious, gracing each and every action with a word of thanksgiving and praise. In this way “... the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight”. No other way.

These are the things Sr. Mary Clare believed in and practiced in her faithful life of contemplation as a Poor Clare. A well-known English poet once wrote about thought and said:

Thought is the welling up of unknown life into consciousness.

Thought is gazing on the face of life, and reading what can be read.

You could substitute the word “prayer” for “thought”. It gave Sr. Mary Clare the insight to “gaze on the face of life, and reading what can be read”. It gave her a freedom and a joy and a zest for life. How lovely it is to have her family with us today and to remember the happy celebration of her one hundredth birthday. She loved the Mass that day, and the lunch afterwards, and meeting so many friends, and even the sing song afterwards which I wasn’t allowed to attend! We celebrate a long, fulfilled and faith filled life which took her from Drogheda to Levenshulme, from Levenshulme to Darlington and from Darlington to Much Birch.

Wherever she was, she continued to “wait on the Lord”. She fulfilled the words of the English poet T.S. Eliot when he said:

I said to my soul be still

And without hope.

For hope would be the wrong thing:

Wait without love.

For love would be love

For the wrong thing.

There is yet faith.

But the faith, and the love, and the hope

Are all in the waiting