

ADVENT 3 2018
16 December
St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle

**The world has waited long,
Has travailed long in pain;
To heal its ancient wrong,
Come Prince of Peace, and reign.**

The words quite clearly are the last four lines of the hymn that we have just sung!

**The world has waited long,
Has travailed long in pain;
To heal its ancient wrong,
Come Prince of Peace, and reign.**

Advent of course is the season of the Christian year during which we try to re-awaken in our hearts the sense of 'waiting' that has been so much part of the human character and condition down through the ages. "The world has waited long."

But allow me to take you at least partly aside for a moment or two.

Many of you will know the name of, even if not the works of, the poet Edwin Muir. He was born on a farm on the Orkney Islands in 1887. A kind of ideal existence came to an end when his father lost the farm. When Edwin was fourteen years old, the family moved to Glasgow. In quick succession, his father, two brothers, and his mother died. For Edwin now, God was either "deaf or indifferent". There was no point in continuing to pray. He worked for some time in the office of a bone factory. "The bones", we read in his autobiography, "were yellow and greasy, with little rags of decomposed flesh clinging to them. Raw, they had a strong, sour, penetrating smell. But that was nothing to the stench they gave off when they were shovelled along with maggots into the furnace On hot summer days it stood around the factory like a wall of glass." His existence was, to say the least, "depressing".

I shall not continue with biographical detail except to say that, in due course, faith returned and that, as a self-taught man, he had in the end a very distinguished academic and literary career, his work being very much entwined with that of Willa, the wife whom he married in 1919 when he was in his early thirties.

I mention Willa because I think she must be the person at the heart of one of his most enchanting poems. It is called **The Confirmation**. It is a love poem. Though brief, it is too rich to be savoured in whole as part of a Sunday morning sermon, but I shall read to you the first six lines.

**Yes, yours, my love, is the right human face.
I in my mind had waited for this long,
Seeing the false and searching for the true,
Then found you as a traveller finds a place
Of welcome suddenly amid the wrong
Valleys and rocks and twisting roads.**

Those lines came to mind of course, during the season of Advent, because of the words:

I in my mind had waited for this long.

Like Edwin Muir, many of us will have been blessed by a particular relationship, the companionship of marriage or friendship, and, like Edwin Muir, on looking back will see that this is something that we have, albeit unconsciously, always been 'waiting for', patiently anticipating and maybe longing for.

**Yes, yours, my love, is the right human face.
I in my mind had waited for this long.**

In tune with what I believe to be a great Christian tradition, I cannot but believe that our human relationships are a foreshadowing of, and steps along the way to, that enjoyment of God's presence to which we are called, and for which we are destined.

Edwin Muir writes of his particular human relationship:

I in my mind had waited for this long.

Advent is a time during which once again we get in touch with that 'waiting' for something greater; a waiting that is part of the human character and condition; a time during which we dig deeply into our hearts and minds, to unearth that sense of hoping and expecting and longing for what we can only think of as a full and natural participation in God's Kingdom; God's reign of love, promised through Jesus Christ.

We do this most of all, of course, in our times of prayer; those very precious moments that so many of us find it almost impossible to squeeze into our busy

lives. But when we do discover an occasion to hush the noisy world, and to keep at bay all those distractions that usually clamour for attention, in the silence we can know ourselves to be essentially 'waiting' creatures; people of hope, expectation, yearning and longing. And, as if by some miracle of which we are not worthy, it seems occasionally that our 'longing' turns to 'loving', and that we just touch upon what it will be to enjoy being in the fuller presence of God, to respond all-lovingly to God with our hearts and minds and souls, and to enjoy that being in God's presence of which our most sublime human encounters are but hints. It can happen that we taste something of the future to which we are called, for which we are destined, and that has been promised us in and through the life of Jesus Christ. Such a taste serves to whet - to sharpen - our appetite.

This brief meeting in the present of what we have always waited for (a kind of Advent bonus) comes as a great gift. I am reminded of some words of Edwin Muir, written a few years before he died in 1959. At the end of his autobiography he wrote:

"As I look back on the part of the mystery which is my own life, my own fable, what I am most aware of is that we receive more than we can ever give; we receive it from the past, on which we draw with every breath, but also – and this is the point of faith – from the Source of the mystery itself, by the means which religious people call Grace."

By that "Grace" given to us through our Advent prayers, we pray more hopefully and with more confidence:

**The world has waited long,
Has travailed long in pain;
To heal its ancient wrong,
Come, Prince of Peace, and reign.**

And maybe we value all the more those other intimations of our destiny.

**I in my mind had waited for this long,
Seeing the false and searching for the true,
Then found you as a traveller finds a place
Of welcome suddenly amid the wrong
Valleys and rocks and twisting roads.**

The Right Reverend David Conner, KCVO