



Waiting and hoping

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In the face of COVID-19 it seems like the whole world is waiting and hoping – for a vaccine, an effective treatment, a cure, and ultimately an end to all the misery that this pandemic has caused. Waiting and hoping are a big part of life for most people. This was certainly the case for the people of Israel.

A small nation surrounded by bigger and often aggressive empires, they had suffered much over the centuries. They waited and hoped for a Messiah who would liberate them from their suffering as their God had liberated their ancestors from slavery in Egypt and given them a place of their own. They are still waiting and hoping.

Christians believe that the promised one did come but as he did not match the hopes and expectations that people had for him, he was not widely recognised. Jesus was not the great and powerful warrior who was expected to end Roman rule and restore Israel to glory. Instead he came into the world as a baby born in a stable and left it as a criminal

dying on a cross. He lived most of his life in obscurity in Nazareth and only in his final three years did people become aware of him.

In those years he was an itinerant preacher, known for his stories, his healing power, and for his friendship with tax collectors and sinners. As Peter Kearney's hymn, based on the suffering servant passages in Isaiah, puts it *"we didn't think that kind of man could be at the heart of God's plan, a lowly loser in ragged clothes, the man God chose"*. He was not at all what people expected, not what they waited and hoped for and so many did not recognise him as the promised one.

It often happens that what we wait and hope for does not appear, at least not in the way that we expected. In 1973 my plans for the summer fell apart at the last minute. Because things did not work out, I was deeply disappointed and struggled with the alternative plan that was hastily put in place. Looking back now I am glad the original plan did not

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work out as I would not have met someone who has been a very dear friend for almost 50 years now. If the original door had not closed, this one would not have opened.

I am reminded of the movie *Sliding Doors* which explores how the life of the main character unfolds in two completely different directions based on a simple event - whether she catches a train or misses it. Catching the train triggers one chain of events while missing it and arriving just a few minutes later results in a totally different story line. In his book *The Ghost Map*, author Steven Johnson describes how Dr. John Snow discovered that cholera was water borne and that the outbreak in his area of London in 1854 was linked to a water pump in Broad St. He persuaded the local council to have the handle of the pump removed and the disease was stopped.

Reflecting on turning point moments in history, Johnson says: *"A hundred disparate historical trends converge on a single modest act - some unknown person unscrews the handle of a pump on a side street in a bustling city - and in the years and decades that follow, a thousand changes ripple out from that simple act."*

How many such moments happen in a person's lifetime? We will likely recall some of the major moments of decision which shaped how our lives unfolded. I occasionally wonder what might have happened if I had not decided to join the Columbans in 1967. Where might I be now and what would my life have been like? But it is not just the big decisions. Even simple decisions, events or encounters can have a ripple effect in our lives. I am aware that choosing to open some doors means that others are thereby closed.

I am also aware that my original choice had to be constantly renewed. Being a Columban has provided me many wonderful experiences for which I am deeply grateful.

A similar dynamic is played out in the story of the meeting between the risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene. She had watched as Jesus died and his body was taken down from the cross and laid in the tomb. Early on the first day she came back to anoint his body. When Jesus spoke to her she did not recognise him, mistaking him for the gardener. She turns away from him and looks towards the tomb.

Everything she had witnessed and experienced led her to believe that Jesus was dead. She is looking for his body. It was only when he called her by her name that she finally took her attention away from the tomb and the Jesus that she had known in the past and turned towards the risen Jesus standing before her. Her focus on the door that had closed blinded her to the real action of God that was unfolding in front of her. The new door that opened was so much more than she could ever have expected or hoped for.

Advent is the season of waiting and hoping. We know that what we waited and hoped for has been given to us in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Yet because a good portion of our lives still involves waiting and hoping, doors opening and closing, and the ripple effect of even simple acts, the church provides us with a special time and a season to pay attention to them.

We are emboldened to believe that what we wait and hope for, our deepest hopes and desires, will come about.

We are also called to develop discerning hearts so that we can recognise the presence and activity of God, even when it does not match our expectations.

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