

In my last homily I mentioned Samuel Becket's strange play, *Waiting for Godot*. Written originally in French between 1948 and 1949, it is, undeniably an unusual piece of drama. There have been many interpretations of the meaning of the play, but the Author, Becket, refused to be drawn on what it really meant, beyond what was in the text, like Pilate writing the superscription for Christ's cross: "What I have written, I have written." [Jn.19:22]

The basic plot involves two characters: Vladimir given to metaphysical musings; he is philosophical and restless. Then there is Estragon, who is more down to earth, preoccupied with mundane things. It is as if they balance one another out, whilst all the time waiting for a character called Godot, who never arrives. It is, in other words, a play in which nothing happens, yet audiences have found it spellbinding and beguiling.

That man in the gospel this morning had been waiting, waiting thirty-eight years. Others had been healed ahead of him, but he had to go on waiting. It is as if he were forever trapped in a Becket play, *Waiting for Angel* who, as far as he is concerned, also never arrives. The Sheep Gate pool at Bethesda is the one where sheep were washed before being offered in sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem. No doubt, something geological event caused a disturbance in the water from time to time, that invited the infirm to test their faith in the healing power of the God of Israel.

This waiting man clearly believed in that power, and clearly believed that, in the words of the common English expression, *first come, first served*. It was his lack of assistance, his want of friends to help him, that meant he just lay there, day after day, waiting. Who, after all, had the time in this life to wait alongside him: an earthly Estragon to his heavenly minded Vladimir?

He is, of course, paralysed in more ways than one: rendered inert, crippled by his illness, and unmoving, fixed on his pallet in this place, bound to wait here, day after day, fixed by his longing, his faith and his hope. But he is also paralysed by such determination, such loyalty to an idea, such patient endurance. Would we not have given up years ago; got on with our life as best we might? Yet, what if all of this is for nothing, all in vain; what if, like Godot, the angel never comes for this man? Perhaps it is only the evidence that others have, indeed, been healed ahead of him, that keeps him waiting, day after weary day.

As with all the great signs that Christ performs in his gospel, St John invites us to see the wider meaning, not just the implications for the individuals involved. It was not just *that particular wedding* at Cana that was supplied with ample wine for the feast: every marriage in Christ is offered an abundance of grace by His presence. It was not just Lazarus who was raised at Bethany - as we celebrated on the Saturday before Palm Sunday: we all share in that prefiguring and prophecy of the General Resurrection. And this man, waiting at the Sheep Pool, means more to the evangelist than just one individual whose life is reordered: for he also symbolises old Israel itself, St John's own people, the Jews, who throughout their history had to wait.

The great patriarch, Abraham, had to wait many years for one son through whom his descendants would be as many as the stars. The children of Israel would wait four hundred years, enslaved by the Egyptians. Moses lived eighty years before he found the God of his fathers. For forty years the people wandered before they reached the promised land. Seventy years they languished in Babylonian exile. Then they had to endure the rule of foreign powers: the Persians, the Greeks and then, the Romans. And all the while, they awaited the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ, promised by Moses the God-Seer. So here in this man, biding his time, waiting at

Bethesda, St John presents us with epitome of Israel itself, longing for redemption, waiting to be set free.

The man in the gospel waits thirty-eight years for someone to help him: *"Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled,"* he says. But the Man has finally come, yet not, as he imagines or dares to hope, to lift him up at the right time and put him into the sheep pool; Christ does not do that. Why not? Because the era of the Old Covenant, the old, multiple sacrifices, the very reason for the significance of this sheep pool, is drawing to its close. Something new, something surprising has arrived.

Waiting for the angel has now finished, for with a word he is healed: *"Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your pallet, and walk." And at once the man was healed, and he took up his pallet and walked."* But this is not a scene from *Waiting for Godot*; this is the Gospel of John, this is the *Evangelion*, the Good Word and the fulfilment of the promises made to the forefathers: it is the Christ, not an angel; certainly not Godot! It is the God-Man who has indeed come, not late in time, but as and when God had foreordained. This is the whole point of St John's Gospel, as he tells us himself: *'Truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.'* [Jn.20:30-31] This is the faith in which we stand; this is the confession of faith upon which Christ built His Church.

There are plenty among us who are like this waiting man at the Sheep Pool: people with faith but, somehow, still waiting, still attending, yet seemingly, spiritually paralysed, perhaps considering that they have made no progress in their spiritual lives throughout all these years. Let us consider ourselves. Are you among those who come here to the Liturgy, week by week, every week, when not constrained? You know and God knows. Do you pray, according to your rule, faithfully, morning and evening, every day? You know and

God knows. Are you one of those who read the Scriptures every day, who study and know the Orthodox Faith? You know and God knows. And what of our witness to Christ, our ascetic struggle, our repentance and humility, our charity? You know and God knows. Maybe you have been faithful all these years, yet despite the patience and the waiting, nothing seems to have changed. Beware of trying to make private covenants with God; there are none. We are not bargaining in our spiritual lives.

Our waiting, our faithfulness, our spiritual struggle, is not about conforming the world at our convenience, built around us, arranged about us, to fit around us. Though we be faithful many years, it seems we only ever hear of others who experience miracles; of saints whose lives were so harmonised with God's will, that they had access to the power of God and wrought wonders through their prayers. We believe and long and hope that God would also deliver us from our suffering and our very real and immediate needs, yet the devil is somehow always on hand, suggesting, ready to whisper in our ears a note of sarcasm: *it's always the prayers of others He answers, not yours. Why bother with all this waiting, this faithfulness?*

But how does our piety measure up alongside this? Even if some should give up, we continue to pray in all circumstances. Why? because we belong in one body, Christ's Church. Some of us are suffering, some receive blessings: it makes no difference. St Paul tells us in his first letter to the church at Corinth, *'If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it.* [1 Cor.12:26] As Fr Filip reminded us last week, we too in the body of Christ suffer with our fellow Christians around the world who, even now, are undergoing persecutions of all kinds. It is in His body, the Church, that we wait and endure sufferings, knowing that they are borne by all Orthodox Christians; and it is in the same body, the Church that we rejoice, sharing in the blessings granted to other members. Was it not so two weeks ago

when Fr Alexander received the grace of the priesthood to become a presbyter in the Church of Christ?

At the very end of Samuel Becket's play, Vladimir says, '*Well? Shall we go?*' And Estragon replies, '*Yes, let's go.*' The text finally ends with the stage direction: '*They do not move.*' But we are not trapped in that situation; we are not waiting for the Messiah like the Jews of old, or even those of today. And nothing of what happens in the course of this life, or even anything that fails to happen, can be the final end of our waiting. We are not wasting our time, waiting for Godot who never comes.

We already have, we already possess, everything that we need to enter into eternal life, '*every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,*' [Eph.1:3] if only we might conform our lives to the mind of Christ. As for our prayers, our sufferings, our needs in this world, we can still wait upon God's will, in God's time, as He knows best: Our Lord has taught us that we just continue in our prayer and never give up, as in the parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge. He commands us, indeed, to watch and pray, for in the end it is we, ourselves, who are changed, finding that we have sought and entered the Kingdom of God, where all things will be added unto us in any case. For if our patience is not rewarded in this life, it will surely be so when the kingdom is revealed. For our patience teaches us endurance and he who endures to the end shall be saved.