

**DO NOT BE AFRAID**

The joy of waiting in a time of fear

**Rachel Mann**





## Tuesday

### Waiting in isolation with others

I'd been dreading the arrival of this day all week. I'd caught it creeping up on me out of the corner of my mind's eye. Now it has arrived, and having had a bad night's sleep, all I want is for it to be over. There is no prospect of that. I have been at the hospital since 8 a.m., though my appointment wasn't officially till 10. I was told to get here early for the prep. Ughh, the prep. Just the word gives me the heebie-jeebies. It wouldn't be so bad, but this is a return visit to the Endoscopy Unit after a failed attempt a few weeks before at what is ordinarily a routine procedure. Though what is 'routine' for the medical staff (and indeed for most patients) is not quite so routine for me. I've got so much historic damage to my remaining bowel that the prospect of a camera investigation – and the associated prospect of agony and bleeding – is disturbing. Indeed, the previous attempt didn't work out. Just trying to get me prepped for the procedure damaged my insides and was excruciating. Today, we're going to have another go, hopefully with a slightly more careful approach (and a lot more sedation).

It is now heading towards 12 noon. My stomach rumbles. My mouth is dry, and not just with stress. I'm not supposed to drink or eat before the procedure. When I'm not rushing to the toilet, I lie down on a trolley in my little cubicle. I have already finished my book and the signal for my phone is terrible. I can't even doom-scroll through my social

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media feeds. I lie on my cot and listen as the world of the ward unfolds beyond the curtain which separates me from other people and my fate. As I lie there, I want the medical staff to come and take me to the procedure room. At the same time, I don't really want them to take me there at all.

I want the waiting to be over, but what am I waiting for? In one sense, nothing more than a routine medical procedure and test, and for that test to be done with. I want to know the results, good or bad. I wait for the work to begin so that I can just get out of here and on with my day. There is a deeper dimension: I am here with others. As I catch snatches of conversation from beyond my cubicle – 'Do you want sedation?', 'Do you have any allergies?', 'Sharp scratch', 'I'm scared' – I feel solidarity with my fellow patients. I feel for the patience of the nurses. I sense their tiredness.

It is interesting that such is the nature of the medical unit and such is the intimate and embarrassing – for most – nature of what the medics do here, that this is not a place to talk and share stories. We wait in our cots and cubicles and then we get out of here as soon as we can. Even if we wanted to, we're all too dazed after the procedure to speak. I wait also, in a sense, with the medical teams. They are kind and tender and, in the midst of clinical imperatives, don't forget our humanity. However, they also just want to get us through our test and then on with the next task. The place is so busy and they are so stretched. I've never known this unit so stretched. But here we are, all of us – the patients, the medical staff – waiting with one another. We wait and watch for signs of movement – are they coming

for me? Is the treatment room free? – and live, therefore, in

an odd kind of tension.

I think we wait with God too – the God who longs to

set us free, but who is with us in the midst of our everyday

experiences of ordinariness, frustration and fear. The God

revealed to us in Jesus Christ has never been afraid of

the places where painful, terrible and – well – less than

pleasant things happen. There is a reason that we worship

a God who goes to the cross. Our God is one who shows

solidarity and faithfulness with his people when they face

the trials of the wilderness, as when Moses leads them

towards the promised land; who goes with his people into

exile in Babylon. Our God knows us from the inside out, is

caught up in our lives and loves us, despite the fact that we

sometimes turn away from him.

I am so conscious that when we find ourselves in

situations like those we can face in a hospital we can feel

atomised and separated from one another; the sheer stress

and distress of facing treatment or surgery or a procedure

can push us in on ourselves. While the psalmist might

say, 'I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me

and heard my cry';<sup>2</sup> in such isolating places it can be

difficult for us to wait uncomplainingly and with dignity.

We become tired and irritable because we are deprived

of food and drink and comforts. Yet, God is there. Not

as a kind of cheery, ever-smiling presence urging us to

be better and kinder, but in our uneasiness and distress.

As I wait, you wait, we wait, God waits with

us, sometimes in our longing just to get through this

day ... this situation ... this moment. God, even when we

cannot sense him, is present with us on the seemingly  
endless, lonely road. Bidden or unbidden, God comes.

### Prayer

Jesus, when we face times of trial,

grant us the grace to dwell in your love;

as you stand by us, help us to stand by you

in your hour of need. Amen.

### Questions

• If it is okay to do so, consider situations where you've

felt cut off from others and/or you've just had to get

through it. What strategies did you use to help?

• What is the role of prayer in helping us deal with

challenging situations?

• 'Bidden or unbidden, God comes.' To what extent do

you think that's true?



## Monday

### Waiting to breathe easy ...

Memory is imperfect. It is open to suggestion and to rearrangement as well as erasure and editing. Never has that been truer, in my personal experience, than with regard to my memories of the Covid-19 pandemic. This only became clear to me when, in the spring of 2023, a friend and colleague – who had been intimately involved in our diocese's response to the crisis – shared his retrospective thoughts on his work over the previous three years. His forensic account of the different phases of that extraordinary, often horrifying period reminded me of just how much I'd forgotten. He spoke not only of the various lockdowns – which I recalled only too well – but of the 'tier' system (what was that again?!) and the shifting nature of the rules which dominated and shaped all our lives. When he finished I realised that – whether due to feelings of trauma or simple lack of grip – many details for me had simply been lost.

But as I say, I do remember the endlessness of waiting for the various lockdowns and restrictions to end. These seemed to go on for ever in Manchester, not least because – as my friend kindly reminded me – we were trapped in the highest, most restrictive tier for the longest time. Indeed, there was, at one point, speculation that we were being held there because Manchester mayor Andy Burnham – the so-called 'King in the North' – was being punished for standing up to Downing Street.

An extra factor for me, both in terms of what I remember and what I've forgotten, was that I was advised to shield. The first lockdown was perhaps the strangest experience of my life. I was fortunate to have friends who dropped off food and said 'Hi', but, in effect, I was completely alone. I didn't go outside beyond my little garden or have physical contact with another human being for nearly a year. About twelve weeks into my isolation, a neighbour's cat wandered into the house, and I briefly left the Zoom meeting call I was on in order to shoo it out. When it just stood there and allowed me to stroke it, I almost burst into tears. That little cat was the first living creature I'd touched for months.

My friend's report on the pandemic response reminded me how scared we all were before the first vaccine came online. There was such a shortage of information, and we simply didn't know what to do for the best. The first time I went outside alone – beyond my garden wall – was in late summer 2020. I took my walk in the evening; though it was still light near 9 o'clock at night, I figured most people would be at home.

You might imagine I would feel released into joy and freedom. Rather, I felt gripped by near panic. I walked out past my front gate, all masked up and so very unsure. Disorientated by the space, I had all the confidence of a foal taking its first steps. I was anxious about meeting people. What if they carried the dread disease? What did I have to say to them? Would they see how scared I was and laugh at me? What did it even mean to be social and sociable now? Perhaps you think I'm being overly dramatic. However, as I walked out into that summer evening, I felt my breathing

speed up and become tight. I am not prone to panic attacks, but I found myself concentrating hard on inhaling and exhaling, deeply and slowly.

It seemed to me as if I were the last person alive. There was no one else around. There were no cars. It was as if the world had been stripped clean of life – a strange and disconcerting experience, especially in the midst of a metropolis. For my world back then was not open fields and trees; it was tarmac and houses and everywhere paved.

As I began to find my footing, however, I felt as if a whole new world was becoming available. Though going outside was still desperately dangerous – this was months before there was a vaccine – I sensed in this odd, alien environment something of the living God inviting me into a greater hope and space; inviting me into a place where to breathe was the only thing required of me; inviting me, indeed, to breathe in the Spirit and let out fear; inviting me to receive the love of God that, in the midst of anxiety and fear, was always and ever present. Just for this moment, it had been worth the waiting to inhale and exhale easily. There would still be days to come when I knew I would struggle, but I had – that evening – a foretaste of God's goodness.

Famously, Wordsworth once said that 'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.'<sup>2</sup> I've never been quite sure of that definition, always wanting to resist the Romantic impulse. However, Wordsworth's dictum applies to a poem I wrote in response to that first evening out in the world after months of isolation. It captures



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something of the wonder and joy of receiving God's generosity after waiting in fear for so very long; it reveals a kind of personal 'flash-light' moment, my own experience of the people who walk in darkness seeing a great light.<sup>3</sup>

### An evening prayer

Tonight, I shall be tell-all, tell how outside  
Became mine, mine again, how glass  
Of eyes misted and I learned breath,  
*O Physician heal thyself.*

I shall tell all, of blue, of old roads  
As if newly-laid, Jerusalem, blue of bluebottle,  
Gleam of rain, who knew pavement  
Could raise a body through shoe?

I shall be tell-all, hear! I touched  
Neighbour's wall, *Love thy Neighbour*  
*As thyself*, tip of finger tap, this is God  
On first day in Eden, first things felt –

I did not know tree, mere sight, could be Jesu,  
I am tell-all, like He who was raised  
He sings Day we cannot dare yet see.  
Tonight, I speak a hymnody. Behold, sky weeps.<sup>4</sup>

### Prayer

O God, the Holy Breath,  
breathe your life through us,

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that we might know your abundance.  
Grant us the space and time  
to watch and wait for you  
and attend to all that you wish  
to reveal to us. Amen.

### Questions

- If it is not too distressing, take time to reflect on your memories of the pandemic. Are you surprised by the things you have forgotten about it?
- Were there any positives at all from that time of distress and waiting?
- What helps you discern the presence of God in the midst of your day-to-day life? What gets in the way?

## Saturday

### Waiting on a miracle

When I was little – up to about the age of puberty – I prayed three things night after night. I prayed, first, that there would be no nuclear war; second, that my dad's life-threatening asthma would get better; and ... well, I'll tell you more about that third petition shortly. My prayers were often feverish, and desperate; they expressed a longing for God to intercede in areas which struck my child's mind as of pressing importance. It felt to me as if I was asking God – the God who I had read about in books, or been told about at school and church; the God who can do anything if he wants – for a miracle.

And 'miracle' struck me as precisely the correct word. In the early eighties, I was so sure that the world was about to be destroyed in a nuclear conflagration. I remember the leaflet 'Protect and Survive' coming through the letterbox, offering (frankly ridiculous) advice on how to get through a nuclear war. I remember the ominous TV ad that accompanied the leaflet and the ever-present sense that the Cold War could go hot at any moment. I was equally sure that my dad's health was on the edge and the work of physicians was not sufficient to ensure he would survive. I am still scarred by the death-rattle sound of him desperately trying to get his breath night after night in our little house. He would have been in his early forties then, but he sounded and looked so much older. I was terrified. 'Please God, make him well,' I prayed.

### Waiting on a miracle

I have long been convinced that God answers prayer. I am also certain that miracles happen, having witnessed such myself. I am equally sure that thoughtful, restrained caution needs to be applied to how we expect miracles. More often than not, they are the work of God's time rather than ours, predicated on us waiting on God in such a way that we – slow creatures that we are – have an opportunity to catch up with the grace that is going ahead of us. We naturally want the instant miracle, the immediate answer to prayer. We want the sign and wonder, and I do not doubt that such extraordinary, world-shaking happenings are possible. More often, the God who invites us to wait works his marvels in the waiting.

Which brings me to my third childhood petition. My most fervent night-time prayer of all was that, when I woke up in the morning, God would have turned me into a girl. For when I was little, deep in my bones, I was a boy who desperately wanted to transition from male to female but was terrified that anyone would ever find out about this most particular longing. I prayed and prayed that God would make it right. I even prayed that God would make me happy to be a boy – anything to help me cope with the ever-present sense of desperation about my gender identity. But God seemed indifferent to my petitions, and when I became a proper teen, I put away such childish things as prayer. God, I decided, doesn't work magic. God, I decided, doesn't exist.

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In my work as a priest, I've been told of miraculous healings, and I'm never quite sure what to say in response. I know the glorious and transformative power of Jesus, and do not doubt that in his company the dead have been raised and the wounded made whole. My experience of living in the household of God, however, is that those works of love and grace are rarely as dramatic or instantaneous as we'd like. Sometimes, healing does not obviously come, and I find it crass when someone suggests that its absence is predicated on a lack of faith. To be in the company of God is to embrace mystery.

My own experience of transition over thirty years ago – which I suspect some who are reading will find distressing and perhaps even wrong – has been one of gift. I have been surprised by joy. Yes, life has sometimes been incredibly difficult, but the fact that I am here, writing this is – for me – a sign of a miracle.

Sometimes, we simply have to wait on God. I often think about the child and teenager that I was, so deeply submerged in sadness. I want to tell my young self that it will be okay. That God *does* listen. God *does* attend to our prayers. But it may be in the waiting for the blessing that the blessing comes. John Donne famously said, 'in heaven it is always autumn, his mercies are ever in their maturity'.<sup>9</sup> It has taken me years to find my way to the blessings of God's autumn.

I cannot regret or apologise for my commitment to finding a path where I could transition from male to female. To see God in all that pain and struggle, however, is the work of a lifetime; it is a grace of

maturity. God is ever merciful, and I don't say that in a pious, easy way. I say it as one who has been tested and seasoned.

Though the experience of gender transition is rare, human longing for miracle and healing is universal and deeply ingrained. In the face of desperate personal, family and global situations, we yearn for things to be sorted and made right. Those of us who follow Jesus have the additional desire for the world to know the peace of Christ which surpasses all understanding.

And that peace can and will be known. Not only for my 11-year-old self, but for everyone, I would like to echo the words of Isaiah:

Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you;  
therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you.  
For the LORD is a God of justice;  
blessed are all those who wait for him.<sup>10</sup>

### Prayer

O God of healing and miracle,  
in you is found all life and renewal.  
Renew my faith this day  
and help me see the works  
of your hands transforming your world. Amen.

### Questions

- What is your own view on miracles? Why? Have your childhood prayers 'come true'?
- 'Miracles, more often than not, are the work of God's



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time rather than ours.' To what extent do you agree or disagree. Why?

- How has your prayer life changed over time? What has helped deepen it or made it more difficult?