



Seasons of Grace

Praying with Mary MacKillop

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SEASONS OF GRACE

There is a season for everything,
a time for every occupation under heaven:

A time for giving birth,
a time for dying;
a time for planting,
a time for uprooting what has been planted.

A time for killing,
a time for healing;
a time for knocking down,
a time for building.

A time for tears,
a time for laughter;
a time for mourning,
a time for dancing.

A time for throwing stones away,
a time for gathering them up;
a time for embracing,
a time to refrain from embracing.

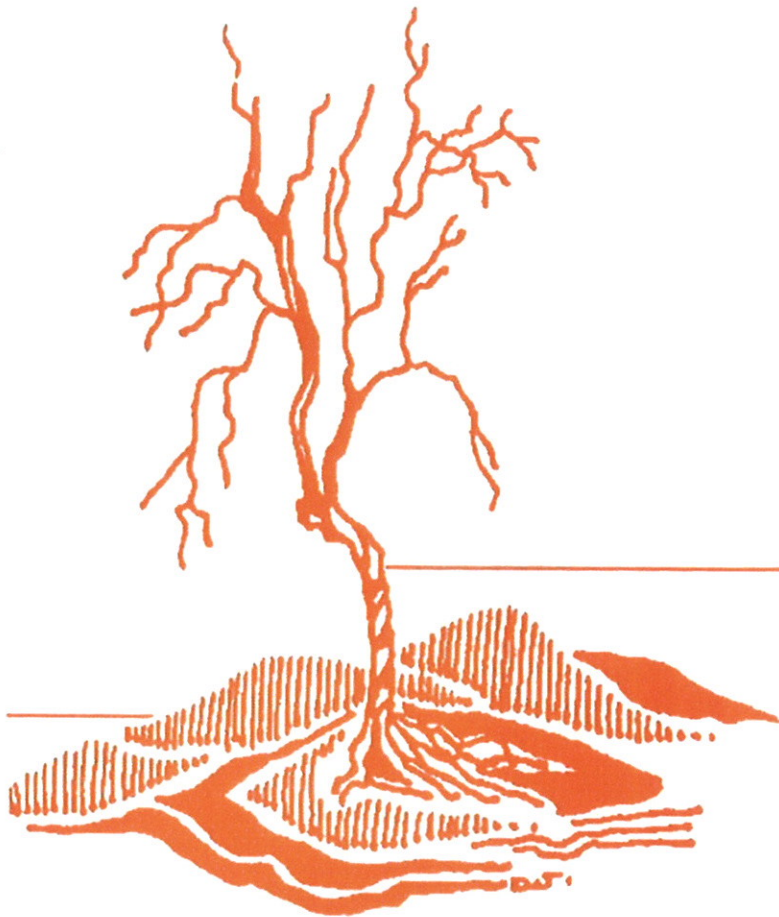
A time for searching,
a time for losing;
a time for keeping,
a time for throwing away.

A time for tearing,
a time for sewing;
a time for keeping silent,
a time for speaking.

A time for loving,
a time for hating;
a time for war,
a time for peace.

Eccles.3:1-8





Advent

A Season of Longing

Longing for some anticipated outcome is an essential part of the human experience. It is not unusual at these times to find feelings of hope and feelings of dread swirling around at the same time. Anxiety and apprehension can be uppermost at one moment and then overtaken by a surge of expectation and promise. It is often at such times of uncertainty when that impatience and hope are intermingled.

Advent is a time of longing and waiting. The Church's liturgy during Advent is full of exclamations and directives. There is a strong use of imperative language and cries of longing. Many expressions like, "Come, Lord Jesus!", "Let us see your face and we shall be saved", "Come, O Lord, do not delay!".

None of this is strange to our experience in daily life. Even as children when we waited in gleeful anticipation of Father Christmas' coming we knew how two conflicting feelings could coexist: that of expectation and that of apprehension. We were never too sure if Santa had heard that we had not always been good. A woman expecting a child knows these simultaneous feelings. Whole nations know the experience of waiting and longing for the results of peace negotiations or food convoys or a just outcome to elections.

MARY'S PRAYER OF LONGING



Mary MacKillop knew this Advent experience well. There were many times when she waited and longing for the Lord to make his will known. The time she spent at Portland in Victoria was a genuine Advent experience for her. Let us try to explore the ways her experience of this season of her spirit might have drawn her into the meaning of Advent.

Mary spent some time in Portland, teaching and trying to provide for her family. As the eldest, she was the bread-winner. Her duty at this time was to support her mother because her father's financial mismanagement had brought the family close to destitution.

As a young woman Mary had shared a dream with Father Julian Tenison Woods of bringing the good news of God's love to the poor, uneducated children of the bush of South Australia. When she lived in Penola, Mary had seen the demoralising influence of ignorance and deprivation on this scattered and needy people. Julian's creativity and Mary's openness were fertile ground for this dream.

For three years she lived at Portland Mary nurtured these ideas. Those of us who have been gripped by a possibility, a yearning or an awakening, know well that it is possible to be entranced by a dream.

We know that Mary considered herself deeply privileged to have the job of sacristan in Portland. Her younger sisters, Annie and Lexie often referred to the hours of silent vigil Mary spent in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. It was in this time of silence and prayer that Mary's dream took root in the depths of her spirit.

OUR PRAYER OF LONGING

The prayer of longing belongs to the Advent season of our lives. Something may be evolving and taking shape but it is still hidden. Advent puts before us the powerful image of pregnancy. The expectant parents feel the new life stirring and growing, but as yet, cannot see the child's face, do not know anything about its personality, capacities or even if this baby will come to birth. For them, the prayer of longing and hope are as natural as breathing.

Begin by finding a quiet place where you can be undisturbed. Find a position in which your whole body can feel relaxed, comfortable, yet aware and attentive. Notice any tension that you are carrying in your body and consciously relax. Let your whole body become still and balanced.

After closing your eyes, begin to attend to your breathing...just be aware of it...if it is jerky and uneven, allow it to become rhythmical...if it is rapid and shallow, gradually slow it down and deepen it so that you are breathing deeply, slowly and evenly.

Within the stillness and quiet of your own being, focus on a word such as "Jesus" or "Come" or "Peace". You might even prefer to concentrate on a phrase from scripture, "Teach me your ways, O Lord!" or "I have loved you with an everlasting love."

Let the word or phrase fall into the rhythm of your breathing. This repetition deepens the stillness and concentrates your spirit. After a time, you will find that you will feel in the presence of God and that words are not necessary. Imagine that you are sitting in God's presence, totally at ease, sustained by the reality of God's love.

When it seems time to emerge from this deep prayer of quiet and stillness, come back to the surface of your consciousness and pay attention to your breathing. Becoming aware of the room around you, opening your eyes and expressing a word of thanksgiving to God with whom you have spent these intimate moments.



The following prayer, written in contemporary language, bears the stamp of Advent experience. As you pray this prayer, place yourself within your own experience of waiting and longing.

God of Wisdom, I stand here in the uncertain moments
of my life and wonder what my future direction might be.
Keep my heart open to the way you might show me.
Help me to be patient and to learn the wisdom of moving
forward with steps that are guided by your Spirit.
May I have the courage to venture past safe horizons
and place my trust in you.
Show me your way that I may follow.

For Mary MacKillop her prayer of longing would have had this kind of trust and may well have been expressed in the words of psalmist:

Poor and needy as I am,
the Lord has me in mind.
You, my helper, my Saviour,
my God, do not delay.

Ps.40

O God, you are my God, I pine for you;
my heart thirsts for you,
my body longs for you,
as a land parched, dreary and waterless.
Thus have I gazed on you in the sanctuary,
seeing your power and your glory.

Ps.63

It is most likely that during the Advent seasons of our life we have cried out to God with longing. We, like Mary, may have known desires forming deep within our hearts and have felt a yearning for some resolution to our problems. It is this experience of waiting and longing that we share with Mary MacKillop in Advent.

MARY'S NOVENA

Mary was familiar with the form of prayer known as the Novena which is still part of the devotional life of many people today. A novena consists of nine consecutive days of praying for a particular intention. It probably had its origins in the prayer of the early church in the time between the Ascension and Pentecost. Mary used this prayer form in two crucial Advent times of her life.

At Portland, Mary was well respected and loved while she was teaching at the Denominational school. She recognised that this popularity could hold her back from returning to Penola and dedicating her life to God in the service of the neglected families in that area. She was able to say: "I was too much loved there." Her solution was to ask her friends and the children to pray for nine days for her intentions. Wisely, she did not let on to them that she was praying for God to show her the way to leave Portland.

She was totally unprepared for the response! Her popularity diminished in the wake of an unfortunate incident at the school for which she had to take the blame.

The headmaster, during a school inspection, duped the Inspector into thinking that his class was of a very high standard. Firstly, he transferred the pupils from Mary's and Annie's classes into his own because they were well prepared. Secondly, he stood behind the Inspector, prompting the children with the correct answers. Young Peter MacKillop, Mary's brother, carried news of this cheating home to Mary's father who protested vigorously. The headmaster was dismissed as a result; Annie was not permitted by her father to continue teaching at the school and Mary was blamed for the whole affair. She writes:

In one short week after the novena, the storm burst. God permitted a very bitter enemy to rise up against me, who said such things of me, that all I cared most for, turned against me, and again, for four months, this storm raged - and I stood alone.¹

This took care of her dilemma about being too popular! Ironically, the incident was probably the catalyst for the birth of her adult commitment to God. Much later, when in Rome waiting for a decision about the Constitutions for her new Religious Order, she again charged her sisters to organise a novena. She reminded them of the efficacy of this prayer when she wrote that through that earlier novena in Portland "the ties which bound me to the world were broken."

OUR NOVENA

The Novena can also provide us with a prayer focus at the Advent times of our life when the future is unknown and formless. A novena can be nine consecutive days, hours or months of prayer. Mary's purposeful use of this form of prayer might inspire us to use it in our Advent seasons.

It can be adaptable to any situation. For example, a parent who observes that their son or daughter is showing signs of stress due to the pressure of examinations could find this prayer empowers them to keep a sustained vigil or companionship with their child in this approach to the exams.

The novena can be well suited to the prolonged prayer needed for world peace or bringing justice to the oppressed or for finding food for the hungry or for restoring dignity to those who are broken. A family dealing with a crisis of sickness or some other distress may choose to commit themselves to a novena.

In the novena we can be specific, we can intensify our longing, our support and empathy will grow. The positive power of our love and God's love can be targeted a situation which is volatile and formless. Like Mary MacKillop, we can grow in our sense of God hovering over the chaos and formlessness of our lives.



MARY'S PRAYER OF GENEROSITY



Mary MacKillop also had a strong devotion to John the Baptist. She well understood the occasion in John's life when he was asked by the priests and Levites from Jerusalem to identify himself, John replied:

*I am, as Isaiah prophesied:
A voice of one that cries in the desert:
Prepare a way for the Lord.
Make his paths straight!*

Jn 1:23

This is an Advent stance and Mary seems to have identified with John's way of life. This is all she really wanted to be - one who prepares, one who wants to lead others towards God, to facilitate God's encounter with others especially those in need.

In her Book of Instructions to the Sisters, recalling St John the Baptist, Mary encourages:

We must trust to his wonderful light as a patriarch and prophet, and pray earnestly for his spirit of penance.

The theologian, Walter Bruggeman, defines a 'prophet' in language which fits Mary's spirituality and describes the orientation of her life. Such a person "sees with different eyes and perceives the depth of what is really taking place, is not simply swayed by how others define that reality. She hears at a different pitch and feels with the heart of God."

OUR PRAYER OF GENEROSITY

The Prayer of St. Francis is a prayer of generosity in which we, too, can feel with the heart of God.

*L*ord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

*O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much
seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Such a prayer can only be prayed if we perceive ourselves as channels or midwives through which God reaches into the lives of others. In praying these words let us ask: For whom are we called to bring peace, create joy, penetrate the darkness?

A GENEROUS FUTURE

Mary MacKillop journeyed through her Advent seasons with the same challenges that face us as we wait for the unknown or as we prepare for some new phase of our lives. In companionship with Mary MacKillop let us pray that her willingness to give God such a central place in her life at these times might inspire us to move slowly through the Advent experience and to explore it well.