

# I Work and I Wait

by Msgr. James O'Reilly

A homily for the Third Sunday of Advent Year A

Be patient until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer awaits the precious yield of the soil.

The desert and the parched land will exult. They will bloom with abundant flowers.

James and Isaiah draw their comparisons from the world of natural growth and of agriculture. What they say to us about the cultivation of our lives takes on a new interest today, because in our world artifice tends to overpower nature. Agriculture becomes agribusiness and the environment suffers. A similar impatience creates an ecology problem in the kingdom of God. We can learn from the farmer.

Farming is a pursuit in which one has to maintain a careful balance between the natural and the artificial, between action and receptiveness, between working and waiting. The farmer does not simply let nature have its way. He takes a hand himself. He interferes. He cultivates. But only up to a point. Beyond that point, he waits for the hidden forces of nature to do their part. To that extent the farmer is both active and receptive. The effect of his action is not to produce the crop but to dispose the forces of nature so that they yield the crop. The farmer receives the result as a gift, though not without effort on his part. Nevertheless, the result is not an effect of his efforts. It is more in the nature of a reward. Success depends on keeping

a careful balance between activity and receptivity, between nature and artifice, between working and waiting.

One of the lessons we are learning today is that you can overuse artifice. You can bring to bear on nature a degree of violence that destroys its fruitfulness. Agriculture can become agribusiness to the point where natural rhythms are broken down, with consequences that are damaging. The world of nature is in danger of being made sterile through the violent impatience of humans. We abhor waiting. We are in a hurry to reap the fruits. We allow activity to outrun receptivity.

A similar kind of ecological problem exists in relation to the cultivation of the kingdom of God. We cannot leave it all up to God. There is work for us to do. The hungry have to be fed, the sick have to be nursed, education has to be provided, cities have to be planned, governments have to be organized, and God has to be sought and worshipped. To that extent we must interfere, so to speak. We must take things in hand. But only up to a point. Beyond that point we wait for the gift of God. Though our efforts are called for—like the farmer's—yet the completion of the human family, the coming to fullness of life together and with God in the world, this—like the crop—is the fruit of hidden forces. The effect of our action—political, social, economic—is not to produce the result but to dispose God to yield it. But like the crop, you cannot hurry the kingdom. We wait. In Advent we add to our spirit of action the spirit of receptivity.

That comes hard on us today. I think we borrow from the world of technology some of its impatience. That could be as damaging to the ecology of our divine milieu as it is to the

physical environment. When, we ask, will we make this world a place fit for people to live in. Let us with one mighty effort increase the G.N.P. of good works, so to speak, make the production line of the kingdom roll. Patience—you say! Why, if we're patient enough, we'll all be dead! Just so. But is that quite so bad? Perhaps that too is part of our waiting, our receptivity!

Reading the gospel, one suspects that John the Baptist who had announced the kingdom is now worried about it. Locked up in the fortress prison, he wonders perhaps about his release. If the kingdom is at hand, how come his rescue is delayed? If he waits long enough like this, he'll be dead! Jesus calms his doubts. The kingdom is here—all the signs of which the prophets spoke are evident. The blind see, the lame walk, the poor hear the good news. And in the morning John will be free? No, not a word about that. That is not how the kingdom is to come for John. Blessed is the person who does not find me and my way of bringing the kingdom a stumbling block, Jesus seems to say to John.

The seed must die before all becomes well. Death is a part of the husbandry of the kingdom, part of the good news that is preached to the poor. Death also belongs to the Advent, to the waiting and the receptivity that must be added to the action of our lives to bring us to harvest-time of the kingdom. To have known this, to have seen it realized in Jesus—that is what makes the least of us a greater than John the Baptist. He only prepared the way for this message. We have heard it, seen it. In our Eucharist we touch and taste it.