

Chinstrap Penguins apparently nod off up to 10,000 times a day. Put like that it sounds somewhat negative – depending of course on ones point of view. How can they get anything done if they're forever nodding off? Surely this is narcolepsy at its worst? They could do with a good dose of amphetamines. But it's a survival strategy that works, for the flip side, or should I say flipper side, to this is that for most of the day, and 'night', the Chinstrap Penguins are awake, at least during the breeding season when due diligence is vital for the successful rearing of their young. They may well have longer bouts of sleep when moulting or during the Antarctic winter but this almost constant state of being awake during the Antarctic summer means they can keep an eye out for predators such as Brown Skuas and other penguins. The conclusion being that micro sleeps are as effective as periods of deep sleep in keeping the penguins going. I've tried practising this myself but it just doesn't work – once I nod off it's usually several hours before I wake again and the egg has gone. There must be another way of keeping me and the monastery going and of course there is and it's all about staying awake to God's presence, whatever comes – a daily practice which in itself is a gift. Paul says as such in the second reading

*“I never stop thanking God for all the graces you have received through Jesus Christ... Christ has indeed been strong among you so that you will not be without any of the gifts of the spirit while you are waiting for the Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed ....” ( 1 Cor 1:3-9)*

Now there are lots of questions on this – surely Jesus has already been revealed, so what are we waiting for? Well, perhaps it's not so much our waiting for Christ that matters as Christ waiting for us – waiting for us to catch up with the fact of his having come in all his flesh and blood and of still being with us in all his flesh and blood but manifested now in terms of spiritual gifts – a sort of continuous present which never nods off and which we are also invited to enjoy. It's difficult for us to live in this state of constant awareness because of our flesh and blood nature but possible if we allow for our spiritual nature too. In our flesh and blood nature the demands of the day can keep us awake both by day and night and a certain alertness is necessary to meet these everyday demands but there's a deeper awakesness, or awareness, which will carry us through these periods of anxiety and will, like the periods of micro sleep enjoyed by the Chinstrap Penguins, become second nature if we allow it. And the joy of this second nature is that it is in fact our first nature, our primary calling, the nature that underpins all the rest, our true end in Christ, because it was our true beginning, made in the image and likeness of God, made to receive all these spiritual gifts which will keep us awake at night even as we sleep, a sort of nest egg waiting to be hatched. This is the gift we look forward to at Christmas.

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