

First Sunday of Advent - 2.12.18

1 Thess.3.9-end, Luke 21.25-36.

“If you can wait and not be tired of waiting”

Many of you will no doubt recognise that as a line from Kipling’s poem “If” and it is in an interesting thought as we enter into this season of Advent, this season of waiting. We are waiting to celebrate the Incarnation, the birth of Christ, when God revealed himself to the world in great humility and great humanity, but we are also looking beyond that to the promised and much anticipated second coming. And there is probably a third aspect, the in between period in which we live and in which we wait for those occasional encounters with God in our every day life.

We spend a lot of our life waiting, and each type of waiting brings with it different feelings and emotions. We wait for the bus, tiresome; we wait for a doctor’s appointment, frustrating; we wait for a holiday, exciting; we wait for exam results, stressful; we wait for the birth of a baby, thrilling anticipation but also apprehension, we wait for the result of medical investigations, traumatic; we await a visit from a friend or loved one, joyful anticipation. We are waiting for a new vicar, well depending on your take it could be any or all of those emotions.

So waiting can bring with it a variety of emotions. I know that a lot of us like to affect a certain Scrooge- ness in our approach to Christmas but as Christians I think we are really agreed that we wait for it with joyful anticipation. But how do we feel about our waiting for the Second coming? We lustily sing the great Advent Hymns: O come, O come, Emmanuel; Come thou long expected Jesus, O, come quickly! Alleluya! Come Lord come!

My mother told me of an experience she had as a child. She lived in a small village on the edge of Dartmoor and the important piece of information which you need to have in order to understand the story is that Billy Maybin was the village builder. They were in church and had been thinking about the second coming and during a period of extemporary prayer one man raised his eyes and hands to the ceiling and cried Come Lord Jesus come down now, Billy Maybin will repair the roof! I can see Ros our Treasurer looking anxious about where this sermon is going. Few of us I suspect will view the second coming in quite that way.

A very different perspective is provided by John Polkinghorne who was Professor of Mathematical Physics at Cambridge but is also a priest in the Church of England, he described the waiting for the second coming as, “ looking ahead to the end of history, when the Kingdom of God and the Lordship of Christ, presently expressed in ways that are partially obscured from our sight, will ultimately be visibly vindicated and fulfilled”. The emotions generated by waiting for that sort of coming are probably quite complicated and not easy.

Which is why Advent is a penitential season, for these few weeks we are not to be too comfortable. It provides us with a time and space, before we get to the excitement and cosiness of Christmas, to think about issues which we often put to the back of our minds. In Advent we come face to face with the realities like death and the moral seriousness of life that is called judgement. We may not understand the science and indeed scientists are divided on quite how the universe functions but they are united in thinking that at some point it will come to an end. What Christians bring to that debate is our belief that God’s faithfulness is without end.

Waiting in our very day life tends to be a passive affair which is probably one reason why we find it frustrating but this is in contrast to the Christian waiting which should be both active and intelligent. Our New Testament readings today are focused on the question of waiting.

One of the reasons Paul felt that he had to write to the Thessalonians was that they were becoming impatient as they waited for the second coming and Paul tells them to use the time to prepare and that involves loving one another, loving their Christian community but also showing love to the wider community. Luke's message is also that the faithful should not be discouraged by their waiting and he too focuses on our behaviour concluding that sin, which would include lack of love, causes us to be unprepared.

Luke also gives us the wonderful image of Christians being alert like a dog with its nose in the air. When we were first married we had a Boxer dog and she was a much loved member of our family for 16 years. We frequently went to Cornwall to visit Carole's family on their farm. Sadie loved those visits; she would drink the milk which was left out for the calves, she would tease the two cwt. bullocks, she would fight with the farm cats, although that usually ended in a draw, she would run in the fields and would delightedly sit in the front seat of the cattle truck with Carole's father as he did his visits – it was the nearest you could get to Doggy heaven. We tended to travel down after work and would arrive in Cornwall in the dark. Sadie would contentedly sleep in the back of the car all the way down but when we were within about four miles of the farm she would sit up, her nose would be up turned and sniffing the air and she would remain in that excited position until we arrived.

Sadie was of course a very intelligent dog but she didn't know that we were going to Cornwall but somehow despite her appearance of sleeping she was always alert and recognised that Cornish treat well before she saw it.

This theme of being alert is again picked up in the Advent hymns:

Wake O wake! With tidings thrilling the watchmen all the air are filling;

Hark the glad sound the Saviour comes;

Sleepers wake the watch cry peeeth.

Luke's message is that we have to be alert so that we recognise the second coming when it happens. Of course it may not be any easier to recognise than the first coming. Who expected Jesus to come as a poor, helpless, humble child – I'm not sure that I would have recognised him even as an adult let alone as a child.

How do we recognise someone? We do so because we know their characteristics and our task in Advent is to become familiar with God's characteristics so that we do recognise him. Our daily lives are complicated and often difficult and taxing and we develop strategies for protecting ourselves. One of the challenges for us is not to insulate ourselves to such an extent that we never really experience anything and therefore don't pick up on those characteristics of God.

Even with the best of intentions that can be difficult in our busy lives but Advent provides a break in our year in which we can wait, a time and space to wait intelligently and actively. We can focus on recognising the characteristics of God, we can raise our noses so that we are alert and ready to recognise him when he comes.

I doubt if there is any one of us who hasn't in some way started preparing for Christmas, we want to be ready.

Advent is about being ready, ready both for Christmas and the beyond.

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