

James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11 – Waiting

Advent is all about waiting.

We look back to the days before Jesus was born. We put ourselves into the shoes of the Jewish people who had waiting for 400 years since the last word from the prophets. They felt abandoned by God: oppressed by pagan empires; still held in captivity. The prophets had spoken of how God would come to them, to save them and bless them – he would send the promised Messiah. But when would he ever come? They had waited so long.

We also look forward. We are waiting for the fulfilment of the promise of Jesus' return. We have waited for 2000 years! We have waited so long. When will he come to save this world from its confusion and despair? When will he come to set this world to rights?

We start with John the Baptist and our Gospel reading

Let's begin by going back to our reading from Matthew's Gospel.

John marked the beginning of the end of that long period of waiting – the waiting of the Jewish people for the coming of the Messiah. John's whole life had been devoted to preparing the way for Christ; his preaching called people to wake up to the fact that the kingdom of God was about to arrive. He called on people to be baptised, to repent and be washed clean of all their sins that they might be ready to meet their God.

John had pointed out Jesus to some of his followers declaring, "Look, there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" The Messiah has arrived. John knew that his work was done and was glad to hand over to the Lord Jesus saying, "He must increase and I must decrease." He expected the Messiah to be filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12). John believed that the Messiah would put the world to rights, rescuing his people from those who oppressed them and destroying their oppressors.

But John is now in prison and does not know what fate will befall him. He is waiting through one empty day after another, and he is wondering, "Did I get it right? Was this really the promised Messiah or was it simply a fantasy I dreamed up. If the Messiah has come, why am I still in prison? If the Messiah has come, why does evil still have the upper hand?"

Waiting can be painful and dispiriting. John needed an answer and so he sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you [really] the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Waiting can also be difficult and distressing for us. I remember 5 years ago being summoned in to hospital because I had serious heart problems. For six weeks I was confined in the newly opened Southmead hospital where things were not always working properly, waiting for them to diagnose what was wrong, determine what needed to be done and then do it. Then I was taken to the Bristol Heart Institute, part of the BRI, where I had heart surgery but then, due to infection, I had to wait for several weeks before I could have fitted the pacemaker I needed. During these weeks of anxious waiting my heart stopped – thankfully only for a short while. I began to wonder whether I would ever get out of hospital – when would this ever end. I am sure that you will have had your own experiences of waiting and wondering and worrying.

Jesus defies expectations

Jesus defied expectations in the way he fulfilled the promises of God's word.

His birth in a stable at Bethlehem defies all expectations concerning the coming of the one who would be King over all creation. Certainly this was not what the Wise men from the East expected when they saw his star in the East: they came seeking for the new King in Herod's palace.

Jesus death upon the cross was not how his followers expected he would save his people from their sins. The two travellers on the road to Emmaus said, "We *had hoped* that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel."

Jesus defies expectations. His death which seemed defeat and disaster is precisely the means by which he saves his people and that is precisely why we remember his death this evening as we celebrate communion together.

Jesus defies expectations.

And in the years after Jesus ascension, many expected Jesus to return in their lifetime. When the Apostle Peter asked the risen Lord Jesus what fate awaited the Apostle John, Jesus replied, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" (John 21:22) This had fed given rise to the rumour that, like Simeon at Jesus' birth, the Apostle John would not die until the Lord had come. We also read that Christians in Thessalonica were worried because some of their loved ones who had come to trust in the Lord Jesus had already died. Had they missed out on the blessings that Christ would bring at his return? And the Apostle Peter in his second letter speaks of those who mock the expectations of their Christian neighbours saying, "Where is this 'coming' he promised?"

Waiting is difficult. Waiting can be painful. "Hope deferred makes the heart sick" reads the old AV rendering of Proverbs 13:12.

Given that we have waited so long, is the hope of Christ's return merely wishful thinking? Do we *really* expect Jesus' return? How long do we have to wait? We want to cry out, perhaps with John the Baptist and certainly with the Christian martyrs who surround the throne of God in glory, "How long O Lord – why are we waiting?"

But in response to the mockers of his day, Peter explains that this time of waiting is not empty time – it is not simply marking time. He writes, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). This is a time of fruitful waiting.

James 5:7-11

And this is the point made by James in the verses we read this evening from his letter to impatient and sometimes unruly Christians.

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! (James 5:7-9).

We wait for the return of the Lord Jesus. We are to wait patiently, but we are also to wait fruitfully. The farmer waits for the land to yield its crops. The time of waiting is not empty time; it is the time during which the crop that he has sown or planted grows and develops so that it may become ready for harvest. Waiting for the return of Jesus is not empty time, not idle time. Peter says that the reason for what we perceive as a delay in the Lord's return is that he does not want anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance. This is a time of sowing, a time for the kingdom to be growing, a time of preparation for the day of harvest.

In her wonderful little Advent book, *The Meaning is in the Waiting*, Paula Gooder writes,

It was only when I was pregnant with my first child that I realised that I had completely misunderstood what waiting was about... No one who is expecting a child wants the waiting to end and the baby to come early – that can only spell heartache... It was during this period of enforced waiting that I began to discover that waiting is not just about passing the time between the moment when expectation is raised and when it comes to completion ... but that it has deep and lasting value in and of itself... I discovered that waiting can be a nurturing time, valuable in its own right." (op. cit. p. 5)

This time of waiting is a time of nurturing, a time when the kingdom is growing. Peter urges his readers and hearers not only to "look forward to the day of God" – to the return of Christ, but also to "speed its coming" (2 Peter 3:12). How can you speed its coming? Jesus will return when he is satisfied that all whom he has redeemed have been gathered into his kingdom. We speed his

coming as we tell others of the Lord Jesus Christ and of the hope we have in him and urge them to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord and so to join us in looking for and speeding his coming.

Our role now is like that of John the Baptist. We are to prepare the world for the coming of the Lord. And not only to prepare the world, we are to make sure that we ourselves are prepared for his coming. Peter continues in his letter, "What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming" (2 Peter 3:11-12).

In conclusion

In conclusion then, Advent reminds us that our waiting is to be active waiting not passive waiting. We are to:

- Believe – believe in the promises of God that have their focus and fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ. To hold fast to the hope we have in the Lord Jesus – the hope that the day will come when this whole creation shall be transformed and made new at his coming – the day when the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. This is our hope.
- Pray – we are to pray for Christ's coming, "Come, Lord Jesus". And we are to pray for God's kingdom to come and for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.
- Be prepared – we are to be prepared for the day of his coming. We are to live holy and godly lives so that we may not be ashamed when Christ appears.
- We are to prepare others – we are to make Christ known and to be active in every aspect of the work of the kingdom as we prepare the world for the arrival of its coming King and so hasten his coming.

In this way, our waiting will not be disappointing and distressing but joyful and hopeful.

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