

Advent 2020

Colin told me I could preach on whatever I liked this morning, but I have to begin by wishing you all a Happy New Year.

No I'm not losing the plot and yes I do know Xmas hasn't come yet. But the real new year began three weeks ago.

And yes I know it feels odd to talk of a new beginning when the rest of the world is intent on running the year out to its covid ravaged and exhausted conclusion.

Let's face it there are not a lot of people convinced about this new beginning line. Caught up in the worries of what to buy people for Xmas, I'm not all that convinced myself. But then the parish I belong to sends me a new lectionary of readings that start on Advent Sunday and tells me to get on with it. That's about as near as I get to this new year being part of the world where I live, outside church. We spend most of our time caught between a crazy, weary world hurrying its way toward Xmas and the end of 2020, asking us to shop till we drop; and a Christian world that is three Sundays into starting all over, driven by a vision of new heaven and a new earth.

And just what exactly is this new calendar asking us to do?

The answer is very simple, unbelievably simple. The season, the readings, the prayers and the hymns are saying Please Wait.

No wonder the rest of the world doesn't want to hear that.

Wait is not a nice word in 2020. We've spent the year waiting in lockdowns and quarantine, waiting for test results and the one o'clock briefings from Dr Bloomfield. Covid has tested our patience to breaking point. And when public health officials asked people in America to stay home this Thanksgiving and wait till next year to travel, they went out and booked airline tickets by the million.

Waiting has pushed our hyperactive, endlessly busy consumer culture to breaking point and beyond. To have to wait for anything becomes a burden and a sign of weakness and failure. Campaigns to cut wait lists and waiting times drive business and government alike. The next election will be won or lost on whether wait lists for new houses and hospital beds can be shortened. The ideal society is held up as one where we don't have to wait for anything anymore. The ideal internet provider is the one where in order to make a complaint you don't have to wait in a telephone queue for hours listening to music you don't want to hear and messages about new products you don't need. To wait is waste your time because someone else has screwed up and failed to provide the service you deserve.

The new Advent year has a very different view of waiting. This morning's readings offer two role models to follow.

The first is the watchman who stays awake all night to look out for enemies and keep the city safe for all its citizens. He is weary, his eyes burn with fatigue, but he will stay awake till morning comes. With that same determination, that same steely intent, "my soul waits for the Lord" says the psalmist.

And the second role model for our waiting is a wild figure called John the Baptist who has become the stereotype for prophets ever since. A scary, unkempt man (women are usually spared this cliché) who live outside the boundaries of civilized society and rant and rave condemnation on nice people like the rest of us.

The real John was not so extreme. He was the leader of a protest movement against corrupt religion and the head of an alternative community like a monastery before there were monks. Waiting was his vocation, focused entirely on pointing to the messiah still to come but not living long enough to enjoy him. His life was devoted to pointing ahead to a more hopeful future, at whatever cost to himself.

So what do these men tell us about the art of waiting?

Well, there's nothing negative about the discipline they model; nothing passive or weak about this kind of waiting. It's something that is active, intentional, focused, chosen carefully. We do it like we choose to go for a walk, because it's a good thing to do and we will be better for it, and so will the world around us. What's more, we do it expectantly, hopefully, trusting that good things will result.

One definition of pilgrimage is to walk expectantly. The Advent kind of waiting is the same. We don't wait just to fill in the time till something happens. We wait in the hope and the trust that there will be an outcome, be that justice or creativity or reunion or discovery of some sort.

In 1993 the Anglican Church led a walk with other denominations from one end of the country to the other to call for a change to the poverty levels that still impact one in every five New Zealand children. The Hiko of Hope we called it and a quarter of a century later, we're still hoping and working for a result to that call, waiting expectantly.

God's mercies never come to an end, we sang earlier. They are new every morning.

Your own congregations of St Andrews and St Aidans are immersed in another project of waiting expectantly. Working carefully, patiently toward a time next year when a new church you have yet to name will emerge and claim a new future for the people of God in this place. How well you wait for that time, how much faith, hope and charity you invest in that process will determine

whether the new church fails or flourishes. There are many of us watching this bold project, not only Presbyterians, praying and hoping that your waiting will end well and that your new church will flourish. What you are doing requires courage and imagination that we haven't seen since the ecumenical movement lost its nerve.

Expectant waiting and well informed waiting. We don't begin this season in a vacuum, swayed by whatever new rumour and conspiracy theory is washing around. It's not the kind of waiting cultivated by websites like QAnon that weave lies and slander with pseudo science and that Facebook and other social media platforms allow to rage around the globe, threatening the rollout of the new vaccines.

Advent waiting is framed and disciplined by a heritage of scholarship both Jewish and Christian, tempered and tested by the faith and wisdom of holy women and men who give us story and example to guide and illustrate. And when our soul waits for the Lord, in the psalmist's words, the Lord does listen and answer.

The other thing about this Advent waiting is that it's not done just for our well being. We wait with others, as we do gathered here this morning, we are not alone, however few we are.

The best piece of pastoral visiting I ever did was to stand in the garden of a friend who had just lost a child. We knocked on the door and though they were home they weren't ready to see anyone. So we stood for a while in the garden as the evening fell and waited because that was all we could do. And years later, they said thank you. It meant a lot to them at a time when words weren't working very well.

So we can always wait for others and on behalf of other, even when there is no immediate result.

Even when we don't think we're making any difference at all. Sometimes it's simply a matter of modelling to others, especially to those closest to us, how to wait. Hopefully, consistently, without anxiety, patiently, living out God's promise that things will get better. And those who can't see or believe any of that need people like us to show them, by the way we wait, that there will be light beyond the darkness

It is so important in the midst of this pandemic that is far from over globally, even though we think we're doing well at home, to keep focusing outside and beyond ourselves, especially in our prayers. This is not over for us until it is over for all of us. Our liturgies through this new season of Advent and especially at Christmas, when every New Zealand family will have someone who can't be present, must make room for those absent because of Covid, and

for whom we have to wait to see again at some future Xmas. So our waiting must be for others as well as for ourselves.

But most important thing of all about this Advent waiting is why we do it now, in early December, on the not so distant eve of Xmas, even though it hasn't yet arrived, despite what the shopping malls are telling you.

We wait because there is a miracle ahead of us, one that is so easy to misinterpret or take for granted or miss altogether. And that is the way God is revealed in the birth of a child in the middle of nowhere, a back country province under military rule, to a teenage mother and a bewildered father, recognized only by a bunch of disreputable shepherds and a party of foreign tourists. And what has all that got to say about the God we worship and who this God thinks is important?

To begin to get your head around those questions requires us to take time and space for waiting and watching and wondering, as Mary did when she learnt she was pregnant, and holding all these things in our hearts.

We don't need anyone playing music in our ears as we wait, or trying to sell us something we don't need, or telling us where we are in the queue.

We just need to make the best use of this season so we'll be prepared for the miracle when it comes and be able to make it our own.

John Bluck, at St Andrews Sunday 13 December 2020