

Sunday 11 December 2016

3rd Sunday of Advent

St. Andrew's, Cobham

Isaiah 35.1-10; James 5.7-10; Matthew 11.2-11.

Waiting for God

As we all know, Advent is the season in which we wait for God, and our readings this morning focus on a very important part of waiting.

Patience.

Some of us have it, and the rest of us need it immediately!

We all know about the sort of patience that we need to get through our modern daily life. Traffic, train strikes, getting a doctor's appointment, and two words that will send a shudder down your spine: 'help line', to name just a few.

As disciples of Christ, we are meant to handle these frustrations with grace, but some of us are definitely more gifted than others in this department.

I came across a story about a woman driver who was pulled over by the police. When she asked what she had done, the officer replied: 'Well, madam, I noticed that the car had an 'I love Jesus' sticker on the bumper, but when I saw how aggressively the car was being driven I decided it must have been stolen.'

We all let the side down from time to time, and then we have to just pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and try harder next time.

But the patience I would like to reflect on today is the sort of patience we need when we are waiting not for traffic to clear, but for God.

I'm sure that everyone here has had the experience of asking God to change something in their lives, and being disappointed when nothing seems to happen. Day after day we ask God to rescue us or someone we love from a situation, but the only answer seems to be silence.

And apart from our personal situation, there are times when the world in general seems to be in an even bigger mess than usual, and we ask, 'How much longer, Lord? When will you keep your promise to return to this earth and take charge?' And again, the only answer seems to be silence.

It's at times like these that we need patience.

But the sort of patience we need is a special kind

Often when we find ourselves in an unhappy situation, we think we are patiently waiting for God, when what we are really doing is simply enduring, putting one foot in front of the other with our heads down, and thinking 'what will be, will be'. Very often we also carry a load of worry – worry that if the situation doesn't change, we won't be able to cope.

True Christian patience looks very different from this.

Perhaps a better name for it is tenacity: the heroic effort of trusting that God loves us and that everything will turn out as it should, despite our present difficulties. This is very different from fatalistic endurance.

In our epistle this morning, James describes Christian patience using the image of the farmer waiting for the land to yield its valuable crop. In other words, true patience isn't just endurance or fatalism, it is a deep-down faith that the goodness we can't yet see will one day emerge.

There is no denying that this can be tough. As we heard in our Gospel reading this morning, even John the Baptist, suffering in prison, began to doubt. Jesus didn't look like the Saviour he expected. He was expecting a fiery judge rather than a teacher and healer. So he sends His disciples to ask Jesus, 'Are you really the one we are expecting?' Jesus reassures him, using the words of the prophecy of Isaiah that we heard this morning about what God's kingdom would be like: a place of great joy where the eyes of the blind are opened and the lame leap like a deer. 'Yes, I am the one,' says Jesus. This is what God's kingdom looks like – a place of healing and good news.'

True Christian patience means holding on to the truth that Jesus describes to John the Baptist, even in the dark times, or even just the dreary times.

This sort of patience is a very important part of our spiritual lives, but how are we to strengthen it?

I have some suggestions.

One thing we can do is to follow my mom's advice. In my family, we rely a great deal on my mom's advice, and it usually boils down to just five words: 'Come on now, buck up.'

I'm not sure if they teach this as a spiritual discipline, but my word, it's good advice. If you find yourself doing the endurance plod, head down, heaving big

spiritual sighs, I do suggest that you take yourself in hand and buck up. Put some starch in your spine, lift your chin and give that mood of oppression a good kicking. It really does work.

Something else we can do when we are waiting for God is to remember that if our hopes are being disappointed, it is because God is purifying us. He is pruning us in preparation for new growth. It may not feel pleasant at the time but when we look back on it all, we will be able to see the fruits, and we will thank God for what he has done.

The most vital thing we can do while waiting for God is to keep His true image before us. When things are not going well, it's easy to lose sight of God, and that is the greatest danger of all.

Recently an organization, perhaps the Humanists, ran an advert on the side of London busses saying, 'God does not exist, so relax and enjoy life.'

One can only imagine how this must have cheered up the person travelling to the hospital where a loved one lay dying, or the homeless man watching the bus go by, or the worker going home to a spouse suffering from dementia [per Spofford?]

How accurately this bus advert shows that when we lose sight of God, we lose sight of love, but not just love. We also lose hope because we become blind to God working in our lives and in the world.

If we are to avoid this grave danger in the times of waiting, we must constantly remind ourselves that God is love and that He cannot be overcome. We must read the Bible. Count our blessings. Sing hymns. Keep praying.

Finally, we must remember the words of Jesus from our reading this morning: 'Blessed is the one who does not fall away on account of me.' In other words, there is a special blessing in store for those who, despite the silence, despite the dreariness, despite the pain, remember that God is love, that He is at work in our lives, and one day good will triumph.

May we all be so blessed.

Amen.