

Advent is a time of waiting but also of journeying. Waiting and moving don't seem to be two things that go together really... and yet. Well if you think about making a journey to the shops, to school to work.... or to visit your family for a get together, the travelling is not usually without stops, or without some sort of wait. If you're waiting for a bus in this area for example you may have to wait a long time for each vehicle to arrive and there will certainly be stopping places where you wait for other people to come on board. Similarly with trains there are stations and signals and things on the line: cows, leaves, ice.... We are used to waiting for things, but it can be a bit boring, a bit frustrating. I seem to remember my own children waiting to be picked up from school by me (coming from work usually) could be very grumpy when I was late. Smaller children anticipating something exciting simply can't understand why they have to wait. Just last Friday when I took one of my granddaughters to Sainsbury's, she burst into tears when she saw a balloon but couldn't have it, because it wasn't her birthday yet. It's in January, but she didn't want to wait. (She's nearly three by the way!). Not a disaster really, but there are times when waiting is **seriously** terrifying: imagine how it must be at present for children in Gaza and indeed in Israel to have live in a devastated warzone wanting to feel safe, but without any idea of when or if such a time will come. Waiting for peace but not yet journeying towards it.

At this time of year in our Northern hemisphere we continue to move into darkness. The natural light we have is limited: low in the sky and decreasing in length, but we do know that the light will grow again both physically, by the earth's movements, and spiritually by the coming of light in the birth of Christ at Christmas. Even in the dark weeks there is cause for hope. To some extent the time of Advent is therefore one where we can always see glimpses of light, but we are also waiting for it to blaze out again. The darkness of winter might be a time to allow ourselves to quieten down and to rest in the knowledge of what is to come and to prepare for that coming gently and prayerfully. It's a time of year when we ought to be able to rest a little and perhaps our ancestors did just that: around the time of the winter solstice.

Quieten down? Hmm! Well tell that to the children waiting for Father Christmas, tell that to the parents trying to get everything done for Christmas Day. Tell that to the shops and the restaurants and pubs trying to make a livingPerhaps though we can do both. We can choose to wait prayerfully and gently for part of our day and we can also share the excitement and joy as we anticipate what is about to come.

In our readings today we find ourselves in between times: we hear of present and future comfort, promise and hope. The passage from Isaiah is so beautiful and very well known, not least after last night's performance of Handel's Messiah in this church. It speaks to us all of God's love. It's a prophetic and poetic call to the Israelites to remind them that God dwells with them and that their times of trial will be over. It falls between two times: the time of exile in Babylon and the time of freedom in the return to their homeland. "Comfort ye my people".... the darkness is ending and the light is coming. The Advent light that comes is the light of the Messiah, the Coming of Christ. This is the promise and also the hope. Israel is being invited to live in that promise and thus in that hope, so that their comfort comes not so much from the return from exile as in the return to knowing God's promise is theirs.

The time of fulfilling this promise is not given, but the faithful anticipation will be the source of human hope. "Hope is the irradiation of the present with the light of the future that is with God" *Gooder et al* and it offers us a way that we can travel. This is true for the prophet Isaiah and it is the foundation of Peter's Epistle.... Peter writes that we can anticipate the Second Coming of Christ, because we know the Messiah who has dwelt amongst us. In Jesus Christ the promise is fulfilled and in faith we know that he remains with us: not only will we experience his return, but we can do that every day because we can prepare for his coming amongst us by allowing the Holy Spirit into our hearts. Perhaps this presence that we feel often at this time of year, dawns on us like a gradual light, but it may simply burst out.

And that is the image which accompanies our Gospel reading. The first chapter of Mark's Gospel, in fact the first eight verses. Whilst the other Gospels bring the Good News of Christ in more gently, more poetically, Mark bursts out. He is in a hurry to tell us of the hope and promise of the coming of Christ. So we do not begin with the Christmas story, but with John the Baptist, the messenger prophesied by Isaiah. He is the voice shouting, rather than calling, in the wilderness, for us to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.... to make the pathways clear and straight, not just for the progression of God, but for our own ability to walk, or run towards him. The preparation lies in turning our lives around so that we can face God. John's arrival on the scene is, as Tom Wright tells us, **"like a full flashlight in the face."** We cannot stay in the dark because he opens our eyes, he wakes us up and he can't be ignored.

It must have been extraordinary for those who came to listen to him. John looked rough and ready; he was belligerent and loud; but he was passionate about saving the people. We assume he knew he was a prophet, a herald, of the Messiah and he knew that time was short if people were to turn back to God and to receive the blessing they were offered. John is telling people to turn their lives around, not simply to stand and wait for the promised Messiah, but to move towards meeting him. He was certain that Israel was travelling the wrong way looking in the wrong direction (and how very sad that seems for Israel at present) and it was time for the people to turn around and go the right way by means of repentance. Mark tells us that this is the time when the Advent of the Messiah is about to be completed. There will be no pillars of fire, or cloud, no manna from heaven, but the arrival of God in person. The human figure born to make sense of the promise heard in Isaiah for the hope and restoration of God's people: the new eternal covenant. The people came in droves to repent and be baptised, but they probably did not know what they would receive. We know that over time some turned to Christ, some turned away. Christ himself joined them in the water of baptism which became the vessel for the baptism by the Holy Spirit in that wilderness (*I mention baptism as there is one here later today*) the visible sign of the indwelling of God himself in all our lives.

And so we have some advantage in knowing already how the coming of Christ has changed the possibility of all our lives and brought us hope that has fulfilled the promise of God. We can spend time in our own Advent season anticipating the birth of Jesus and we wait as they did in a time and place often of darkness and powerlessness, but hoping for such love that the darkness is overwhelmed. We may respond to John the Baptist's clarion call to come to Christ, but we can also in our quieter and more prayerful times give thanks for the light that begins to grow if we allow it to and that will set everything ablaze in our hearts. As we wait for his coming may we begin to move towards Bethlehem.

Amen.