

Sunday 11 December 2016

3rd Sunday of Advent: Evensong

St. Mary's, Stoke D'Abernon

Isaiah 5.8-end; Acts 13.13-41; Ps. 12

Waiting for God

As we all know, Advent is the season in which we wait for God.

And when it comes to waiting for God, there is one thing we really need.

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 the 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 tonight is the sort of patience we need when we are waiting not for the 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.

True Christian patience means holding on to the truth that in Jesus, God is working in our lives and in the world, even when we can't see it during 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, because if that happens we ourselves become lost.

In our reading this evening, Isaiah describes the behaviour of people who have lost sight of God. Their focus shifts to the things of this world: accumulating wealth, running after pleasure, being clever in their own sight, mocking God and saying 'Let God hurry, let him hasten his work, so that we may see it,' [Isa 5.19].

This attitude was perfectly summed up in our own time recently when 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.

As St Paul says in our reading from Acts, quoting Isaiah:

Look, you scoffers/wonder and perish/for I am going to do something in your days/that you would never believe/even if someone told you. [Acts 31.41]

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

Finally, let us remember the words of Jesus himself: 'Blessed is the one who does not fall away on account of me,' [Matt 11.6]. 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.

