

## WAITING FOR GOD - HOPE

Advent 1 Year B (upload and audio only)

Is. 64:1-9; Ps. 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Cor. 1:3-9; Mk. 13:24-37

Gladstone 29/11/2020

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When I was a child, my father, who was in the air force at the time, was often away from home. This would range from overnight stays, two to three times a week, to up to three weeks or so at a time. While he was away on longer trips, we would wait expectantly for his return because we knew that he would return bearing gifts. While there were only two of us children in the family, my mother had to cope alone a lot of the time without the help of my father. Neither of us children were loud or aggressive or habitually naughty. We were both fairly compliant children—particularly me (surely, this is self-evident).

There were times, however, when, in the innocence of childhood, moral judgements became somewhat blurred, and I, through no obvious fault of my own, found myself in some kind of trouble with the older generation. Small disciplinary measures from my mother was usually all the persuasive argument that was required for my moral education. However, there were those—albeit extremely rare—occasions when more severe disciplinary measures seemed to be called for—but not by me I can assure you.

It was at these times that my mother would bring out the big guns. No, not the strap or some other form of violent persuasion. In fact, no physical violence was done to my person at all—yet the fear of this punishment would send shivers up (and down) my spine. This punishment—this cruel mental torture—which should be forbidden under modern child protection laws, took the form of one short, but nevertheless impact-laden sentence: “Wait ’til your father gets home!”

There is no combination of words designed to send the fear of God into a child more than these. On these occasions, waiting for my father to return home was no longer filled with joyous expectation—rather it was filled with fear and dread. Fortunately for me, this didn’t happen very often.

As we begin the season of Advent—the time of patient expectation for the mighty revelation of God in Christ, we are very often torn between a sense joyous expectation on one hand and fear and dread on the other. If you’re not, then maybe you should be.

The Scriptures tell us that the world is waiting—waiting for the fulfilment of all that God has promised—waiting for that time when the lion will lay down with the lamb—waiting for the fulfilment of God’s reconciliation of the world.

But like the prophet we look around us and see the state the world is in. And in the same way as the psalmist cried out, we too might be tempted to cry out: “How long O Lord? How long until you reveal yourself in all your glory? How long do we and this world in which we must live have to go on experiencing suffering through war, oppression, greed, disasters, sickness, and all those myriads of other things that work together to bring us down? How long until Christ returns and brings in your kingdom? How long...?”

But there’s a catch. There’s always a catch. The church, for too long, has been playing the role of the angry parent, saying to the rest of the world, “Just you wait until Christ comes back. Then you’ll be sorry.” But what about us? We, who are a part of that same world. Are we ready for his coming? Are we prepared for Christ’s return? Are *you* ready? What will Christ say to *you* about how you have lived *your* life?

The prophet Isaiah captured this sentiment well when he penned the words of our Old Testament text for today: *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.* And just as I would hope that when my father came home, mercy and grace would outway any punishment I may or may not have deserved, so the prophet calls upon the mercy of God—to enter into the wickedness of the world, yes—to restore justice, yes—to punish those who rebel against God, yes—but in his coming to show mercy to those whom God calls his people—for they too have rebelled and often gone their own way and are deserving of punishment.

The plea for God to intervene, to show his presence in human history, was a cry from the heart, in this prayer of the prophet. There are times in all of our lives, and in the lives of families and nations when God seems remote. In these times of darkness it seems as if the glorious light of the presence of God—the source of all light and life—is all shut up in heaven, and we long to tear open the heavens and let the light come down. It was like that in the life of the nation of Israel 2000 or so years ago, and it’s still like that today.

But in spite of their situation—in spite of their continued rebellion—the prophet confessed the faith of the people in God, and declared their belief that he would ultimately show his hand to those who wait for him.

And so it has always been to people of faith. We wait in faith and hope for the revealing of the One in whom we believe—but we *do* become impatient. When you look around the world and see the terrible things that are happening—when we see how unfair and miserable some people are—when we can't see over the hill or out of the rut that we're in—when the hole in which we find ourselves, seems like a grave and we can't see out—don't we sometimes look up to heaven and wish that God would somehow come down and fix things up—put things right? Do we actually have the faith to call on him to come, and to wait for him to appear?

Over the last few weeks we have been looking at the coming of the Lord at the end when his kingdom will be established. While people might fear judgement and must expect to be accountable for what they have done or not done in caring for others, we should nevertheless expect to welcome his coming because it will be a time when evil will be banished and those who trust God in Christ can expect to find a place in his kingdom.

In today's reading from the gospel, there is much the same message for today. The disciples, anxious to know when Jesus would finally come in the fullness of his kingdom, ask the same question: When will you return? When will all sorrow and suffering cease? Tell us when. Jesus tells them that there will be signs, and while many have tried to predict the time when Jesus will return, the truth of the matter is that only God knows the day and the hour—and he's not telling. All we can do is trust in the faithfulness of God to bring it about at the right time.

We need to have the same faith in God and the One who will come to save his people and put things right, which inspired the ancient people of Israel, on whose behalf Isaiah called to God to come down from heaven. This faith is expressed in patient, expectant, waiting. In the conclusion to this passage, Jesus says: *And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.* (Mark 13:37) In other words: The time is coming, but you will have to wait awhile and stay alert. Be ready for when the time comes.

As we enter into this time of year of preparation for Christmas, we too would express the same faith in God as the ancient prophets who proclaimed that the Lord comes to those who wait for him. But waiting is not something we are very good at these days. In many ways we are not encouraged to wait. Advertising would have us believe that we can have whatever we want—and we can have it now! This is a common attitude

throughout our Western society today. We want everything instantly, and that also applies to our cry for justice and reconciliation and for Christ's appearing.

During this time as we prepare ourselves for Christmas, it's almost impossible to escape the pressures that are all around us. All of us, however, can make some deliberate decisions to set aside time for the theme of Advent—a time of looking forward to the coming of Christ, and being prepared within ourselves to greet him gladly. We can do it by focussing on the real meaning of Christmas—that through the birth of Jesus, God tore open the gates of heaven and came down—that in Jesus' birth, God reached out to restore our relationship with him.

That is the faith with which we wait—that God will come and restore our relationship with him. That relationship, the new covenant that Jesus came to establish, is to be expressed both in our worship, and in the service of God in the world.

In the meantime, we wait. And in our waiting—we continue to cry out to God. It is not, however, a cry of despair, it's a cry of hope. We know that in the end, God promises to come to judge injustice and all that is evil. But more than that, we know that the judge who is coming is also our saviour and redeemer. And that is good news. We know the delay of his coming doesn't mean the absence of his presence. God is not absent as the prophet feared, but here, with us, leading us forward and strengthening us for service while we wait.

Why do we have to wait? I wish I knew! Many have tried to give explanations, but the truth is hidden somewhere in the mystery of God.

But in the wait, we are not alone. We have the presence of the risen Lord, who in baptism, clothed us with himself, and who in Holy Communion gives himself to us afresh—not only that we might continue to grow into his fullness, not only that we might have strength for the task—but that you and I might have a foretaste of that world which is coming. And so we wait, not as those who despair of God's coming, but as those who know the power of Christ's presence now, and yearn for the day when it will fill both heaven and earth.

To Him be all the glory, honour and praise. Amen.