

HYMNS:	180	“O come, O come, Immanuel”
	172	“Hills of the North rejoice”
		“God make us ready for our celebration”
	188	“There’s a light upon the mountains”
	171	“Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes”

READINGS:	Isaiah 2:1-5
	Matthew 24: 36-44

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

We have all had the experience of waiting at a railway station or airport for a loved one we have not seen for a long time.

I went to Theological College in 1966, in Bristol, leaving my then fiancée in London. We were apart for weeks because the college did not encourage the ‘distraction’ of females in an all male community. But after about eight weeks, which felt like eight years, Judith was allowed to come to visit me. She left London by train on a Friday evening after work. I was so keen to see her I caught the bus to the station when she was only half way to Bristol. I arrived at the station with ‘hours’ to spare. I couldn’t concentrate on a book, I was so excited, so I stood there with my eyes endlessly switching from the empty railway lines to the clock – I would swear someone had put glue on the hands to slow them down. I can still recall that feeling of the agony and expectation of waiting and waiting. At last, at last, in the distance I caught the sight of a light moving towards the station, and then oh so slowly the train crept into station. It shuddered to a halt; and after a delay the doors all swung open, and it seemed as if half the population of London surged out. I remembered the anxiety I felt. How could I spot the one face I wanted to see among the hundreds surging out of the station? But I did. And so did she. And the long hard period of waiting was over, amidst the joy of reunion.

This is the context in which I want us to approach today, Advent Sunday, the first Sunday in the new Church’s Liturgical Year. This year we switch from most Gospel readings coming from Luke, to readings from Matthew. The liturgical colour for Advent is purple or violet, the colour of majesty, the coming of Christ, and of penitence.

A number of evocative words swirl around the theme of Advent – waiting – hope – judgement - preparation and expectation..... Each evokes responses in our hearts and minds; each has serious faith and theological significance.

Let me start by trying to tackle the difficult passage from Matthew. The Gospel is realistically talking about uncertainty; you don’t know what the future will hold. It talks about the rest of the population at the time of Noah, who probably mocked his ark unaware of the flood to come; it talks about two people working together and suddenly one is taken and one remains; it talks

about a householder who would obviously not leave his house if he knew thieves were coming. What is happening in this passage?

At the time Matthew was writing his Gospel he drew together groups of linked memories. So he drew together all the teachings and parables and grouped them into five blocks. He drew together remembered stories of Jesus' healings and miracles, and placed them between the teachings. Then he added at the beginning the birth narratives, and at the end the long passion narrative of Jesus, conflict, arrest, trial, death and resurrection.

Almost all the fifth teaching block is a mixed bag of sayings about the future. These were remembered because of two linked contemporary concerns which were current at the time. First was a conviction that, because of the powerful entry of God into the world in Jesus, the end time would be soon. This was in spite of the fact that Jesus was remembered as saying, 'About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son'. So you have end time sayings.

The second factor was that when Matthew's Gospel was being compiled the city of Jerusalem and the Temple were in the midst of its death throws at the hands of the Romans. Think of the pictures of Aleppo or Mosul, or parts of Damascus today. So terrible was the destruction of Jerusalem that it remained an uninhabited rubbish dump for nearly three hundred years. You will have seen on TV the inhabitants of Aleppo saying, 'it is like the end of the world'. That is what it felt like for the people of Jerusalem.

And what was Jesus' response to these two groups of warnings? 'Keep awake, you do not know on what day your Lord is coming' and 'You also must be ready'. So in the midst of waiting there must be openness to – hope – judgement - preparation and expectation. These inform our Christian life and discipleship in the season of Advent as we wait to celebrate the coming of Christ among us.

I began this sermon by talking about waiting at Bristol station. I waited in hope, preparation, expectation, and yes, an element of judgement – would I still pass the test after many weeks apart? As we wait for Christmas how do we wait? And what are we waiting for?

Leslie has intimated in more than one sermon recently about a sense of foreboding in the world today. I think he touched a common nerve. We wait with varying measures of fear and uncertainty the effects of Brexit, especially for the future of Europe; we fear a newly confident Russia; unending turmoil in the Middle East can only get worse; and now we face the uncertainties of President Trump. As we wait we must bring to our waiting, not endless clock-watching, but hope and preparation, judgement and expectation. How do we do it? There is no better place to start than the words from the first prophet Isaiah.

He was writing in the 8th century BC at one of the many previous times when Jerusalem was under threat. He and the people feared invasion and the army

was getting ready to defend Jerusalem. They were waiting with dread, the enemy were far more powerful, but in the midst of that waiting he looked at events and saw them differently.

He saw that God had a different perspective, yes, he saw God's judgement on his people, but he also waited with hope and expectation. As the soldiers sharpened their swords, and honed the tips of their spears ready for battle, he said, 'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.' Today our tough Christian calling to hold to a vision on a national level that, 'They shall turn their nuclear weapons into power stations and their guns and warships into bridges and railway lines'. As I say, it's a tough call but what we wait for affects how we live our lives now. Sometimes to hold to this vision is simply to affirm what we believe is God's will for our world now.

And on a more personal level, holding to the Advent hope means that our Christian calling is to live as people of hope. We have to continue to do this even when many shake their heads. What better example has there been this week than the husband of the murdered MP Jo Cox? Speaking after the trial Brendan Cox said:

An act driven by hatred has instead created an outpouring of love.
An act designed to drive communities apart has instead pulled them together.
An act designed to silence a voice has instead allowed millions of others to hear it.

He has made no suggestion that he has a Christian faith, but by the grace of God he speaks a Christian message. It is the message of Advent.

The Advent of Jesus is a promise that we can be people of hope, but not of blind optimism. Faith in Jesus Christ is a matter of the stomach and the gut, as much as of the mind and heart. The sense of quickening which Advent introduces drives and corrals us into being a people of waiting with expectant hope, and acting with expectant hope.

We may feel these are dark times, but those of you who are of my generation and older will have memories of the 1960s. In popular culture they are remembered as the age of the Beatles, liberation and fun. The death yesterday of Fidel Castro reminds us that in 1962 we came closer to a world war than in any time since, at the time of the Cuba Missile Crisis. Also for my generation it was a time when we were beginning to meet and marry. The threat of nuclear war hung like a massive cloud over the world.

In groups we would often discuss the threat we felt hanging over us, and two friends of mine said that when they married they had decided not to have children, because they feared for the world in which they would have to bring them up. 'You can't bring children into the world under the shadow of the bomb'. However, in due course, almost as an act of faith, they changed their minds and had their first-born child. I wish I could have quoted to them Isaiah's the great words of Advent promise, 'Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given'. I couldn't because they had a girl.

This Advent, look for the signs of hope, live a life of hope. And you will, by God's grace, discover what you are waiting for.

Let me end with some words from Brazil:

Put your ear to the ground
and identify the noises around you.
predominant are
anxious, restless footsteps,
frightened footsteps in the dark,
footsteps bitter and rebellious.
No sound yet of hopes first footsteps.

Glue your ear to the ground again.
Hold your breath
put out your advance antennae.

The Master is on his way,
most likely he will not get here
when things are going well,
but in the bad times
when the going's unsure and painful.

(From A Procession of Prayers compiled by John Carden)