

Trinity Baptist Church

Advent: 2nd December 2002 (Trinity)

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Reading: Luke 1: 67 - 79 the Song of Zechariah

So: it's Advent again! It's rather a cliché to say how quickly it seems to have come round: probably a function of my increasing age, I should think. But nonetheless, here we are again, in Advent: the WAITING season. So if you want a title for today, the best I can come up with is "**What are we waiting for?**"

I have vivid memories of Advent from when I was seven. I had that September moved into Year 3, my first year in the Juniors, and my school, Hurst Primary in Bexley, housed its two Year 3 classes in what is now Hurst Community Centre, on Hurst Road. The accommodation in the main school building must have been inadequate to cope with the baby-boomer generation. Back then in the mid-fifties you couldn't see the house from Hurst Road, as it was surrounded by high trees. Our headmaster used to come across from the main school once a week to lead assembly, which in those days was unashamedly Christian, and would teach us a hymn each week - and I loved it. Especially the Advent hymns: "Hark the glad sound, the Saviour comes", "On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry", and so on. And the nights were drawing in, the coal fire would be burning at home, the decorations would be going up - the big house among the trees was a great place for being at school; and it was nearly Christmas, with high hopes for additions to my collection of Dinky toys and Meccano - I couldn't wait.

The funny thing about growing up is that, somewhere deep inside, I am aware of a bias, a sort of default, semi-automatic thought-pattern, that still thinks that the focus of waiting and excitement is about presents - and we are certainly encouraged in that by what goes on around us. Yes, there's time with family, and many good motives for looking forward to Christ's coming: but I still find a need to be jolted out of this focus on getting stuff.

Actually, taking a level look at the prospect of last-minute Christmas shopping is a good corrective here, especially when they play that ghastly track "I wish it could be Christmas every day". You should hear my eldest daughter on that topic.

Seriously, though: what are we waiting for? There is serious point to meditating on the virtually incredible story of the Eternal Son of God as a vulnerable, new-born baby, especially in the insanitary conditions in which he was born. I was really struck last Christmas with the actuality expressed in the words of an old 15th-century carol:-

"That eternal Lord is he who made alle thing:

"Of alle lordes he is Lord, of alle kinges King".

For me, you can't have Christmas without traditional Christmas carols - and I hate it when they modernise them! But, you know, the original Christmas can't have been like that in reality. It wouldn't have been a snow-covered "bleak mid-winter", for one thing; and we don't pick up from the music and tradition the probability that the stable was dirty, smelly and draughty. Let's enjoy it, though: in these odd times I really hope you manage to have a great Christmas. But my point is this: when Christmas is over (and I am reminded of Terry's insistence that Christmas lasts for 12 days), we haven't stopped waiting just because it isn't Advent any more (it's Epiphany). We have to come down to normal again; and the wind is chilly in January. So: Waiting for what?

Our Luke 1 passage describes the great hope of Israel for the coming of God's Messiah, and the deliverance he would bring to God's people. You can't read the first two chapters of Luke without noticing the breathless excitement: we've waited so long, and now it's really happening! On a second reading of Zechariah's song, though, you can detect that what he saw happening was the kind of vindication that would have been satisfied to a large extent by the Messiah throwing the Romans out of Israel and setting up an almighty earthly kingdom in Jerusalem - and of course that isn't what happened. The fact that it didn't happen like that is one of the reasons why Jesus was not accepted as the Messiah, and why the Jewish people today are still waiting for the promised deliverance: those, at any rate, who have not given up.

So we need to be clear what we are waiting for. Let's square up to the fact that that the turkey, mince pies and presents elements in the anticipation will let us down. I remember Linus, in the Charlie Brown cartoons, bemoaning the fact that he was being made to write thank-you letters for presents he'd already broken. Let's not forget that some people are very lonely at this time of year. And even a really great time with friends and family is like every single human experience so far: it cools off, people go home, we go back to our normal lives.

We pray, regularly, that God's kingdom will come, and that his will be done, and finish up with the fact that he owns the kingdom, the power and the glory. Yes, the King came when Jesus was born, and his Kingdom is still here, and growing - and he has promised to come back to earth and, so to speak, finish the job: "wipe away all tears from their eyes". This is what we wait for, even when it isn't Advent. As it says in Revelation: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus". But we are not told when: only to expect him "at any moment". So in the meantime - and so far this meantime has lasted 2,000 years - we need to get clear in our minds how this waiting ought to pan out in practice: what it might look and feel like.

It's good to remember that the Bible approves of waiting. The apostle Peter condemns the scoffers who say "What's the use? Where is the promise of his coming? Everything continues as it always has since the beginning."

But waiting can have its dark side. Don't forget that the famous passage in Romans 8: 37 about being "more than conquerors through him that loved us" was written to a church that was about to suffer persecution at the hands of Nero! It isn't the sort of comfort you get from a soft mattress. I wonder how the Christians in places like Myanmar and India think about it. Or Nigeria.

So we need mental muscle, really, to focus on expecting Jesus at any moment, and on living appropriately. What can we, in the West, be doing in this long meantime? What can we build into our "waiting"?

You don't need reminding that the world is full of ghastly trouble and real wickedness, and oppressed and downtrodden people. They are certainly and deliberately longing for a deliverance. We, without the oppression and persecution they face, are also waiting for it, though the need is not so obvious in our experience: but one thing we can do is to help by standing with them in prayer. There's plenty of evidence that they believe fervently that the knowledge that others pray for them is a huge help, and that God answers such prayers.

Often, though, we don't know what to pray for exactly. We don't know the details; or we can't really enter into the fear they have; or we feel that we don't have adequate language. Also, in a troubled situation words are very often the last thing that is needed: when someone is in trouble it's not recommended to give them what we think is the answer. Job said to his friends in Job 13 v 5: *"If only you would be altogether silent: for you, that would be wisdom"*.

Now, we are in a good position to pray for these people, because in God's mercy we do not have to cope with what they face. But I have become convinced in recent years that we set ourselves up to fail in prayer because we set impossible standards for ourselves. I grew up in a church where it was usual for those who stood up to pray to continue fluently for four or five minutes: few of us can manage that, and even if you can it's too easy to waffle. So, rather than give up, are there any alternatives?

For a start, there are plenty of Psalms to use, some of them very explicit, almost rude, in their complaints. If you were to settle down with one of these Psalms open in front of you, tell the Lord that you intended to pray for oppressed and persecuted people, and then were to read the psalm slowly to him, would he not understand and take that as your prayer?

Another idea many of us have found useful is to use suitable recorded music, and sit quietly with it in an attitude of prayer, again having dedicated the time to God. And there isn't any need to use words at all. We held sessions like this in the church a few years ago, and the Prayer Ministry Team continues to use them fairly regularly: we call them "Still With God", and the emphasis is on praying wordlessly. We have sometimes used really angry music as an accompaniment to using some of the psalms which rage against the wicked and the damage they do. We have walked round the room with our fists in the air with some of this music, either reading a Psalm out loud or without using words - and I am convinced that the Lord has understood. Incidentally, I'd be happy to answer any queries about this initiative, so do get in touch.

It can take some time to get accustomed to this approach to prayer; but pray-ers do find it a relief and benefit - and it certainly avoids the scenario of giving up because we don't know what to say or ask for. That can only lead to guilt, because "I never pray for such-and-such a topic", therefore "I am a failure."

Now, while we think about waiting, let's remember what deliverance we are waiting for. Yes, it would be good if these suffering people could be delivered from the immediate trouble they are experiencing; but that is only part of the ultimate focus of our waiting:- the coming of the Kingdom in power and glory, the final Advent: when Jesus reigns unopposed, acknowledged by the bowing of every knee in heaven and on earth. And by standing with these folk in prayer we shall all be waiting together. Paul tells us in 2 Timothy that God will give a crown of righteousness to "all those who love his appearing".

I was interested to learn while writing this that the YP have been looking at Habakkuk. Now there was a man who had to wait - and managed to determine to sing God's praises meanwhile. That man was a towering example of how to wait, especially in view of the things he was waiting for. He lived in a most turbulent period of mighty clashes and wars between world empires, all of which were more or less Israel's neighbours, so that they were caught in the middle. To try to put his situation in terms of the world-wide politics of our day, imagine that you live in the following situation:-

1. 12 years ago, Russia annihilated the USA and took over what was left;
2. 8 years ago, the EU murdered our Royal Family and put a Brussels official in charge of the British Isles, and British society started to disintegrate;
3. 5 years ago, the Brussels official was poisoned Salisbury fashion by the Russians, causing further disintegration;
4. In another 14 years, the Russian army will invade the UK and deport everybody important to Moscow;

All of the actual events of which this list is a picture can be dated from historical records, and they happened in a period of about 26 years. Habakkuk lived in the middle of this short period. Further, God told Habakkuk that the Chaldeans, the "Russia" in my horrid parable, probably the most brutal and savage superpower ever, had actually been chosen by him to carry out his purposes - prompting Habakkuk to pray some incredulous and loud prayers: "What on earth are you doing, God?" And just before the famous passage about the fig tree not blossoming, he says that, despite his heart racing and his knees knocking, he will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come, and eventually come on the invaders as well...

It's worth reading Habakkuk - it's not a long book. There was an old Scottish preacher once who was encouraging his flock to read the Bible more widely. He asked them to imagine someone with a long beard coming up to them in heaven and introducing himself: "I'm Habakkuk" - or, as they pronounce it north of the border: "HABAKKUK". You ask him to tell you about himself, and he responds with "Have ye no' read ma wee bookie?"

So, in case we needed proof, "waiting" is no easy task. And deciding to praise God no matter what is most definitely not a case of simply mouthing the correct formula because it's the right thing to do. Last week Andy introduced us to King Ahaz, who mouthed the correct formula ("I will not put the Lord God to the test") for absolutely the wrong reason. No, we need to pray earnestly to God to work this praising and trustful attitude deeply into our beings, so that we can settle on it at some fundamental level as our course of action. We don't have to deal with Habakkuk's situation, thankfully, although many of us have quite heavy troubles to deal with. But many of our brothers and sisters are right there in the front line. Let's use the opportunities we have to stand with them in prayer, and with them wait for the coming day.

I finish with a passage from Hebrews 10: ***"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the day approaching."***