

Archdeacon of Berkshire – Stephen Pullin – sermon 6th December 2020

You're driving your car and you arrive at a set of red traffic lights. There's one car ahead of you. The lights change colour and the car ahead of you doesn't immediately pull forward but sits there, perhaps unaware that the light has turned green. You shout 'Come on' through the windscreen knowing you won't actually be heard.

Or, you join the back of the checkout queue in the supermarket. The line next to you is moving faster and you visibly tense up, frustrated with the person behind your till.

Or, the slow waiter or the long hold for telephone support and service leads you speak in a way that could be a tiny bit more courteous.

If any of that's familiar, then patience might not be your strong suit.

Patience is a virtue. It's a virtue, but I'm not sure it's a popular one. It's a virtue which could lead us to pray, ironically misquoting Augustine, 'Lord, make me patient, but not yet'.

In his second letter, Peter picks up the theme of patience.

'With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, he says, and a thousand years is like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found at peace, without spot or blemish, and regard the patience of our Lord as your salvation'.

Peter is taking the long view of God's purposes. In this context, he tries to re-orientate our thinking about God's preferred way of working and particularly

directs our attention to the enabling virtue of patience - patience which is Godly in character and which gives time and space for the outworking of God's good purpose.

Patience is a virtue. It is the capacity to accept or tolerate delay, problems or suffering without becoming anxious, or annoyed. Patience is a sign of the Holy Spirit at work in us – what God does in us while we are waiting, is as important as what we are waiting for. Patience is something which Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, encouraged as the normal standard of behaviour, especially with those who might induce other responses from us.

If we think of patience as an enabling virtue, then conversely, its absence can be disabling, sometimes with dramatic consequences. In one Samuel, chapter thirteen, we read about Saul. Saul is on the point of leading Israel against the Philistine enemy. He's at Gilgal, waiting for the prophet Samuel to arrive. He knows that he's supposed to wait for seven days, at the end of which a sacrifice will be offered to God, and only then can the battle begin. But Saul grows impatient waiting for Samuel to show up to offer the sacrifices. Saul's solution is to take matters into his own hands and offer the sacrifice himself.

His precipitous actions, arising out of his impatience, shattered the covenant between God and Israel and signifies a giant step in the disintegration of his soul. Thankfully, our impatience doesn't carry the same consequences, but it doesn't mean there aren't any.

Patience is a virtue. At its best it creates time for change, for repentance, for rethinking, for re-imagining. Patience makes space for kindness and mercy. Patience enables people to walk together whilst difficulties are worked out.

Patience allows time for the work of the Holy Spirit to go deeper and to produce fruit that will last. Patience better enables us to discern God's will, rather than trying to impose our wills on him. Patience, perhaps, is the unsung hero of the fruit of the Spirit which allows the other fruits to flourish.

This year has required patience:

- We have waited for new rules and guidelines to be formulated and explained
- We found new ways of being church together when many of the things we had taken for granted were no longer possible
- We've had to negotiate different, and sometimes competing, expectations
- The business of church has become a more complicated affair
- We've had to make our own adjustments to a very different ways of expressing our common life and ministry in an environment of uncertainty
- And many of us will have faced each new week with a sense of impending Zoom

More personally:

- We have learned to accept restrictions on meeting with loved ones, and perhaps to negotiate our own experiences of loneliness

This year has not only required patience, we're very much aware that it has tested it too. The wells of patience from which we've drawn may be a little depleted. At times, we may have been aware of conversations or decisions or emails that suggested patience was running a little thin. How we are with each other in times of trial is revealing in the moment; but also shapes our relationships when we

return to more normal times. We may need to take time to replenish the wells of patience.

It is great news that a vaccine has been approved and its roll-out may now be very close. Patience has been required this year, and will still be required for some time. In the months to come, a new normality will emerge, the human cost of the virus will diminish and we will breathe a collective sigh of relief.

And then, of course, we will discover completely new circumstances, events and challenges that will invite us afresh to exercise the spiritual gift of patience.

Patience is a truly enabling virtue. It gives time and space for the purposes of God to emerge. Patience is both a gift to others and a choice to be exercised.

As the Lord was, and is, and will be patient with us, so may we offer the gift of patience to others.

Amen.