

Advent 2: Active Patience

2 Peter 3: 8-15a

As Christmas approaches I wonder: How patient are you when it comes to waiting? Will you, for example, patiently eat one chocolate per day from your Advent calendar (if you have one), or scoff them all in the first weekend? Can you resist having a sneaky feel of the presents under the tree with your name on? Are you holding back putting your decorations up until a few days before Christmas, or have they been up for weeks already? Do you save the Christmas music until December or has Michael Bublé been on since September? And have you watched your first Christmas movie yet?

Last week we talked about Jesus' second coming – the Bible promise that Jesus will return and bring the fullness of his Kingdom on earth. If we're honest, many of us struggle with that idea. You might have heard some teaching about this which was confusing or scary and, if we're honest, the readings can be a bit difficult to get your head around. There are some believers who seem obsessed with the idea of Jesus' return, while others do their best to ignore the idea of the second coming altogether. After all, it's been 2000 years since Jesus returned to heaven, so it's understandable to lose hope that God will return and put the earth right. And, if we do still hold onto the hope, we doubt that it'll be in our lifetimes.

If you feel like that, then you are not alone. Many of the first Christians lived with an eager expectation that Jesus would return in their lifetime, but after just a few years some of them began to lose hope. We can see this in Peter's second letter:

“Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, ‘Where is this coming he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.’”

Does this sound familiar? If you dared to have a conversation with your non-Christian friends about Jesus' second coming, is this what you'd expect them to say? Maybe it's something you think yourself? 2000 years *is* a long time to wait for the return of Jesus.

But Peter's first response to this question is simply brilliant:

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient ...”

Do you know anyone who eats pudding in a great hurry? Maybe it's the most amazing ice-cream or delicious chocolate cake? Then they look at their friend who's just taken three mouthfuls in the time it's taken them to gobble the lot, and say, *'Why are you so slow?'* The friend might reply: *'I'm not slow, I'm savouring every bite. I'm patient.'*

Knowing that God is patient and prepared to wait should challenge the hurriedness of our modern lives. Do you feel like you rush from one thing to the next? Or maybe you're someone (like me) who always seems to be multi-tasking, reading emails whilst watching telly and eating a meal, rarely doing just one thing at a time? When you go shopping, are you always looking for the fastest check-out queue at the supermarket? Do you get annoyed when your computer takes an age to download something, or when your child or grandchild takes forever to put on their coat and shoes? Maybe we need to learn that what might feel like slowness to us can, at the same time, be a lesson in godly patience.

Beyond this, Peter tells us that God has a vital reason why he's holding back Jesus' return:

“He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

Peter knew that the final return of Jesus would come with judgment over the earth. Jesus' cross and resurrection mean that when we are in him, we have no fear of judgment. But entering into God's Kingdom does require us to believe in him and come in repentance. It doesn't mean having the answers to everything or being perfect, but saying *'You know, I don't understand all of this but I want to know more, and I'm sorry when I get things so wrong. When I hurt God and hurt others by what I think, say and do.'* It's that simple. And, it's for this reason that God is patiently holding back the return of Christ, Peter says, so that everyone on earth has a chance to respond to his gift of forgiveness and restoration.

The idea of judgment isn't however a popular one in today's society where people like to do as they please. But this is how Peter describes God's judgment:

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.”

This doesn't make for easy reading and, for various reasons, this passage has been misunderstood to mean that God is going to destroy the earth. This has fed the mistaken idea that all Christians can hope for is escaping this earth for a permanent, spiritual heaven. But that idea ignores the wider biblical picture which Peter is drawing on, the promise of Isaiah of a new heaven and earth (Isaiah 65:17). Peter spells this out when he says:

“But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth.”

This is the same new heaven and new earth which John sees in Revelation 21. The important question is – what kind of ‘new’ are these writers describing? There is a Greek word *neo* which means ‘new’, in the sense that it didn't exist before – think of the word ‘neonatal’ for a new-born baby. But this isn't the word used in these passages. Peter, in this passage, and John writing in Revelation both use the word *kainos*, which means having a new quality about it – being ‘renewed’ or ‘remade’. It is the same word which describes our transformation as Christians in 2 Corinthians 5:17 – ‘*you are a new creation*’. The old, sinful, broken life has gone; the renewed holy, restored life has come. It's why we often sing the song ‘*You are a new creation*’ at baptisms, signalling the start of something new.

So, where does that leave us? Well, I think it means that God is *not* planning to put the earth in the bin and start again. Instead, he's planning to refine it, remake it and renew it. The Bible often speaks of God's judgment as a cleansing fire which burns off impurities. These words from Malachi 3 come at the very end of the Old Testament:

“But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.”

God's judgment is a fire that will refine the earth until only pure gold is left. So the picture Peter is painting here is of God's final judgment burning up all that is unjust, impure, ungodly, laying bare the earth until the old ‘order’ of things has been destroyed and the original intention of God has been restored. Maybe it's a bit like buying a repair program for your computer that cleans it up so that it runs like new again. And once the earth has been restored, once

the 'old order of things has passed away', God promises to be with us on this restored planet forever.

When you're waiting for something, knowing what you are waiting for changes how you wait. A child waiting for a Christmas present will be very different to a child waiting for a vaccination. You wait for your wedding day, or a special birthday party in a very different way to waiting for your car's MOT.

We are not waiting for an eternity sitting on clouds, or an endless church service, or an infinite sermon. We are waiting for the restoration of heaven and earth, with every good thing made new, and abundant life for all. Knowing what God will do when Jesus returns ought to change the way we live today. Peter writes:

"Since everything [of the old order of things] will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming ... So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him."

Since this is our ultimate goal, Peter says, here is how we should live. We should live in ways which please God, which imitate Jesus, which work for the good of his creation, which build community and society, which seek justice and fairness. And we should communicate the Kingdom of God in how we speak and live, in such a way that people notice. Be people for whom others stop and stare, if you dare. Because if how you speak and what you do – how you live – attracts the attention of others, then people – your family, your friends, your neighbours, your work colleagues - will ask why. And if they ask why, then you'll have an opportunity to speak of your faith, to share something of the Good News of Jesus with them, giving everyone the chance to respond to God's gift of forgiveness and restoration.