

Sunday 13th December Waiting – John the Baptist

We've been thinking over the last couple of weeks about waiting, advent is the season of waiting. We are waiting to celebrate Christmas and the first coming of Jesus, but waiting too for Jesus' second coming and the remaking of heaven and earth as God's kingdom comes in all its fullness.

A few years ago, our family started advent with the end to our waiting...

Our daughter Lucy had met Ryan while he was serving in the US Air Force at Mildenhall, they got engaged just before he was posted to Guam in the Pacific Ocean. Then they had had to wait in two stages that reflect the coming of God's Kingdom, initially for a couple of months before they could marry and spend a few weeks together in Guam, then Lucy came back and had to wait again until 18 months after their marriage when Ryan left the Air Force and came to the UK as a civilian so they could share a home at last. The waiting hadn't been easy for them, as many of us have learnt this year video calling is not the same as being able to physically be with those we love. But, in early December we went to Heathrow and as he walked through the arrivals gate both their faces lit up, their waiting was over and they were able to begin their new life together.

John the Baptist who was the subject of our gospel reading today, must have been brought up as someone who was taught the value of waiting for and trusting in God. His parents had thought they wouldn't ever have a baby and we can only imagine how much they loved the son who had been a surprise in their older years. When he grew up John, had a special role, an angel had told his father that John would make prepare people for the coming of the Lord (Luke 1:17). The prophet Isaiah hundreds of years before John was born had said there would be a voice crying out in the wilderness "prepare the way of the Lord" (Isaiah4:3) and John went out to the wilderness and desert country where he preached using more words from Isaiah, telling people that the coming Lord would

"Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;

say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong do not fear';

your God will come, he will come with vengeance.

with divine retribution he will come to save you.

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy

Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert" (Isaiah 35:3-6)

John preached that God's kingdom of judgement and fire was coming, he criticised those who were in charge of the country telling them they needed to repent and change their lives, he had baptised Jesus and seen God's spirit descend on Him and was waiting for Isaiah's words to be fulfilled - God coming with vengeance and divine retribution. Like many at the time he was probably expecting that Jesus would overthrow the Romans who were occupying Israel and would restore a faithful Jewish kingdom. Then John was thrown into jail, he probably felt quite disappointed he had expected more drama, but for all his preaching, all the people who had followed him and Jesus' arrival as an adult it seemed like nothing had changed, the Romans were still in power, the temple priests were still corrupt.

John's followers brought him reports, telling him that Jesus was preaching and healing people and had gained a following, but that wasn't what John had been expecting and waiting for. Imagine how confused John was. So he did the only thing he could to find out what was really happening, he asked his followers to go to Jesus and ask "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matt 11:2-3)

There's a real lesson for us in this, sometimes we feel like things aren't going the way we expected, we get disappointed and discouraged and wonder what it's all about. I wonder how many of us grumble and mutter and maybe talk to our friends about feeling like this rather than doing what John did and going to Jesus. John didn't send his followers out to talk to the Romans, or the priests, he sent them straight to Jesus, but I bet he was expecting the answer that he got!

Jesus probably had a good idea what John had been expecting so he responded to John's followers simply and clearly, no parables or confusing messages, he simply quotes Isaiah and says "Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is proclaimed to the poor". Jesus wasn't doing things the way that John had expected, instead of coming and changing the world completely Jesus was starting a two-stage process. John was seeing part of the first stage, Jesus the Messiah had been born, and was kick starting the Kingdom of God on earth, he was bringing healing and truth and love – fulfilling the words of Isaiah. Sadly John was killed before the first stage reached its climax when Jesus was put to death and by his dying restored all creation to God, and then rose again as King of the world – His new life both a promise and a model of the new life which is to come for all of creation.

Stage Two of the process will happen when God completes the work he began in Jesus. That is the stage we are waiting for now and while the wait may seem like a long one it promises fulfilment not at a human level like Lucy and Ryan experienced but divine fulfilment when we will see the completion of Jesus work, all those things promised in Isaiah will happen for everyone - sin and injustice will be judged, heaven and earth will be renewed, the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

In short, **everything** will be put right.

In James' letter (James 5:7-8) we read 'Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and the spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm because the Lord's coming is near.'

Living in a rural community we are aware that our farmers don't wait for harvest time by simply sitting around, they monitor what's happening, they watch the crops as they grow, responding to infections and pests and what the weather does, they maintain their equipment so its ready when they need it, theirs is active waiting and that's what we are called to do – look at what's happening in the world around us and imitate what Jesus did - we should be caring for the sick, befriending the lonely and unloved, looking after the planet, proclaiming the good news about Jesus and - especially in this season of advent- waiting, patiently and expectantly, for the glorious day when God will come again to reap His harvest and we will see His Kingdom in all its fullness.