

Waiting with Patience

Isaiah 40,1-11

We all know what it is like to stand beside a bus stop. Usually, we are there to wait for a bus. Often there is a timetable printed and fixed to the shelter. Sometimes there is a very clever sign which tells you which bus is due next and when it will arrive. I know that our experience of waiting at bus stops depends on where we come from. In Germany we are used to standing at a bus stop, reading the timetable and knowing the bus will arrive at the due time. In Britain, things are not quite so precise, so we arrive and check the timetable, we then assume that the bus will arrive sometime. Normally it is late and often after waiting some time, two buses arrive together. I also know that in other countries things are even less organised and the when you arrive at the bus stop, you are lucky if you find a timetable, and even if you do, the bus might arrive, today or maybe tomorrow.

Last week Emily led us through the thoughts of waiting in darkness. Darkness in the world and darkness in our own lives; waiting for the light that would come into the darkness.

This week, we are still in darkness, we are still waiting for the light as we passage through Advent. Waiting in darkness is just like waiting for a bus in the late evening. It can be very dark, very cold and very lonely.

The readings we had this morning are, however, subtly different from the readings we shared last week. Last week we heard two very challenging Jewish texts that did not appear to remind us of the comfort of Advent and Christmas. Two very challenging texts. Today we hear two very well

known advent texts. I think we need at times to be careful when we hear readings that we know and love; they may contain messages and truths that we do not expect.

Both the reading from Isaiah and Mark illustrate times of change. They illustrate turning points in the story of the people of Israel.

I mentioned the experience of waiting at a bus stop, hopeful that a bus would come along. Of course one piece of information that we often get at a bus stop is time-table which shows us when the buses ought to arrive and which route they will take. These readings are also like a time-table showing us where the journey goes and giving us information to help us along with our journey. The effects of the two messages, or information, to the people were different. Different parts of the timetable.

In Isaiah we find ourselves at the time in Jewish history where the people of the nation of Israel finds itself at a turning point. The first 39 chapters deal with the loss of the northern lands and suffering. Even chapter 39 deals with more pain and suffering as the Babylonian invasion was predicted. Then out pops chapter 40 with its message of hope and redemption. The journey of the Jewish nation is about to make a marked change in direction. Freedom appears as though it is just round the corner.

The Jewish nation which had suffered under the Babylonian invasion, received a prophesy from this great prophet Isaiah that would lead them to freedom and the remove the Babylonian oppressor. This was a message of hope in a wilderness that had lasted many years. A message that would mark a significant change for the whole of Israel.

The reading in Mark also illustrates a time of change. John the Baptist has arrived on the scene and is preparing the people for a time of change. This rather strange man who chose to live in very hostile places and eat very simple food called out to the people to warn them that the Messiah was about to arrive. John is portrayed by Mark as the person promised by the prophet Malachi :

'I will send my messenger before you and he will prepare your road for you'

The message we hear in Mark is different from Isaiah's message. This strange man John is calling on the people to change their ways and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. In some ways similar to the changes in earlier days as the Jews were looking for any leader who would relieve them of the influence of Rome. But John was making a very personal challenge as he challenged the attitudes and way of life of individuals rather than of a nation. This was an internal change rather than an external change.

So when the people of Isaiah's day got in their bus it would lead them to freedom to worship God as they wanted and when the people of John the Baptist day got on their bus it took them to meet Christ and to face up to their own behaviour and belief.

Last week we heard that we are standing in darkness during this period of advent; standing in darkness and waiting for the light to arrive.

Of course, as we wait in darkness it is a time of preparation. As we wait for the bus we often stand there and think. We wonder about the journey ahead and the destination it will take us to. We wonder if any friends will be on the bus, or whether the bus will be full of drunken football supporters. There is anticipation and there is a degree of excitement, as well as perhaps some anxiety or even fear. We think we know what is ahead in the journey, but we are never sure.

We stand here at this bus stop of the second Sunday in advent. We wonder about where we are going and who is going with us. We also wonder about where we should go.

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that as a church and as individuals we could use this period of Advent to really search and decide how we should answer God's call in our lives. How we would feed the hungry, how we should give drink to the thirsty, how we should serve God in this place.

John the Baptist served God by making his life a challenge in all ways. He challenged himself by the way he lived seeking out a simple but very demanding lifestyle. Shunning any comfort and demanding extremely high standards in his life. Standards set against what he thought God wanted him to do. This would have been very difficult for him, but placed him in a position where he gained the respect of those around him. He had a message to share and he lived that message.

John demanded a change in lifestyle and direction from those who listened how they had sinned against God and what should they do to have these sins washed away. How they should individually make amends with God and build up a relationship with him. His baptism was a sign of the cleansing of these sins of individuals. John knew that his message would have an effect just as Isaiah had before him. It is equally important for us to believe that, no matter how insignificant we think we are; our message, our act or our word can have a marked effect on people's lives- no matter how small, no matter what.

Preparing for this sermon, I read William Barclay's study on this passage. He quotes a poem, from where I am unsure:

In youth because I could not be a singer,
I did not even try to write a song;
I set no trees along the roadside,
Because I knew their growth would take so long.

But now from wisdom that the years have brought me,
I know that it may be a blessed thing
To plant a tree for someone else to water,
Or make a song for someone else to sing.

The goal will never be reached if we do not do our little part at the right time. Only dreaming does not work; doing a little helps, and every little action builds up towards the purposes of God.

The message that we hear from both Isaiah and Mark this morning are also messages of hope for ourselves. The people of Israel had suffered

both in Isaiah's day and in John's day. They were subject to external rulers who had little time for the Jewish religion. But the messages were both messages of relief for them. The people had paid the price for their mistakes and the Lord had called time on their misery.

I don't know if you drive, but if you do you might have got the odd speeding ticket and along with a fine comes some points off your licence. Too many points means that you lose your licence; so drivers have a great sense of relief when these points have elapsed and the licence is clean again. The relief of the people of Israel was far beyond this; as can be ours when we recognise where we should be heading and what our calling is.

A bit like the feeling when some of our brothers and sisters receive their papers to stay in Germany.

People came from far and wide to hear John, leaving Jerusalem and other religiously significant locations to hear him in a place that was physically and religiously barren. John was showing that the gospel could bring hope in even the bleakest of situations, and in keeping with Jesus' approach, that God could be found in the most unexpected of places.

We can all find this hope this advent time as we approach Christmas Day and meet the Christ child. Many know what it is like to be like the Israelites, living without freedom, either political or religious; living in a society that has values that are opposed to these taught by Christ Jesus; living in a very barren place without family and with few friends. Pulled and pushed by the pressures of this world, either into doing what we know to be wrong or by choosing not to do what we know is right.

But I remind you of what Emily said last week. The light comes into the darkness and gives us light. This is a promise of God.

As we stand beside the bus stop and wonder about all the pressures that are around us, all the influences we have to deal with and whether we should get on the bus or not. I would remind you that the bus will be full of people who have also chosen to go the same way that you are choosing to go. There will be fellowship and praise. There will be joy and understanding. There will be love. There will be Christ Jesus. The babe at Christmas time and the man on the cross who gave himself for us.

And we do not have to wait in the cold and dark alone. Our brothers and sisters are standing at the same bus stop, waiting for the same arrival.

If we choose to get on the bus together, we will be answering the call of Isaiah, we will be answering the call of John the Baptist and we will also be answering the invitation of Christ.

So, this advent, in the midst of the dark and the cold and the wet, let us all make the choice that John demanded and be prepared this Advent to welcome Christ the Messiah into our lives anew.

Let us pray:

In the midst of winter,
we find ourselves waiting.
Warm us, O God, with the hope of Advent.
Chase away the chills and surprise us with love.
Brace us to live with great expectation.
On our journey towards Christmas,
come with us
Advent God.
Amen.