

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

## Patience

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Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> December 2010

Matthew 11:2-11

James 5:7-11

Today we think about the patience of advent. Patience. There has been a lot of impatience in our house recently, as Andrew counted down to his ninth birthday (yesterday). It seemed, not just to him, that it would never come! "Be patient" we would say.

How often do parents at this time of year have to tell their children to be patient. "When can we put up the tree? Hang the cards? Decorate the house? Eat mince pies? When can we hang our stockings? How early can we get up? When can we open out presents?" Be patient. The right time for these things will come. Yes, there is a lot of patience needed in advent, especially for those who are excited by Christmas festivities.

Any time we have to wait, whether for things that we long for or things that we fear, patience is involved. And some of us are better at waiting, better at being patient, than others. Mind you, there is a difference between patience and resignation. Resignation is a passive state, a waiting until something happens which may affect you, but in which you are not actively involved. When it pleases God, the weather will get warmer and this snow will melt, and there's nothing we can do about it till then except get by as best we can. That's resignation. Or the time between the doctor taking a blood sample for a test and us getting the results, when we have to wait but there is nothing we can do, that's when, if we are wise, we are resigned to the wait.

But patience. That's different. That is an active thing. It's a waiting with hope, with expectation; a waiting that is optimistic, that expects good, not a resigned dependence on fate.

When John the Baptist was having a tough time, imprisoned because of his prophetic activities (as so many prophets before him had been), he was waiting. He was waiting for Jesus to declare himself and perhaps come to free him, and his waiting became less patient as the stories about what Jesus was doing and saying came to him. Was he mistaken? Was this not, after all, the Messiah? Should they continue to wait for someone else to come? (And when would that be, and how would it help John in his present predicament?) In his impatience, he sent messengers to Jesus to ask the questions.

And Jesus told them to report back just exactly what they saw and heard: that the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf were being restored to health, the dead were even being raised, and the poor were hearing good news. As a prophet John should recognise that these were some of the things that the Messiah had been foretold to do. Maybe in his own plight, or in the plight of a nation longing for the good old days of a thousand years ago, John had forgotten this focus of the Messianic prophecy. He had forgotten that the Messiah would herald a new age, with new ideals, not reinstate the old. And then Jesus added, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (verse 6)

John was waiting for the right person, but the wrong thing. And when his expectations weren't being met in his way at his time, he grew impatient. And we needn't blame him for that. We would all do the same. We do all do the same.

God doesn't work to our impatience or our expectations. John had to learn to look at things differently, to recognise prophetic fulfilment in Jesus' actions. There is more to the Kingdom of God than we suppose, and we need to look for it. Patiently.

James wrote to a people who were impatient, waiting for the return of the Lord, even as we still wait: waiting for the fulfilment of God's Kingdom, even as we still wait; waiting for their own and the world's final transformation and salvation, even as we still wait. And James told them to be patient, because these things take time, God's time.

In the meantime while they waited they were not to fall into the failings of impatience. What do you do if you are waiting for a bus, or a meal in a restaurant and things seem to be taking far too long? You grumble - to yourselves and your companions, maybe, or even to the bus company or the restaurant manager. You fall into bad-tempered ways. James warned his readers - and we are his readers now - not to grumble against one another. When we see that things are not yet perfect, when we see that we are waiting for God, by his Spirit and by the return of his Son, to act and change things, there is no point in blaming one another.

Instead we should follow the examples of the prophets - people like John the Baptist - who spoke of hope, God's hope, not always the hope that others thought would be best for the people, and suffered for it. This is not a world which tolerates long-delayed hopes, and people in general do not take it well when they are told that their own personal hopes may not be the best for the wider world.

Jesus challenged John to open his eyes and his mind, and look and listen and see and hear and understand. God was at work in Jesus, and John needed to know that. God is still at work in the world, and as we wait for the coming of Christ, we too need to open our eyes and our ears, to fire up our minds and have our understanding renewed, so that we too can know it.

What is God doing in the world? What are the signs of hope, the signs that God's Kingdom is not dead, the signs that Jesus is at work, even if not in the ways we first look for?

Well, God is stimulating individuals to work to help others. Just this week I had a message from the Church of Scotland in Lausanne asking prayers for one of their elders, Cynthia Gunn, who is going to be spending the months from December to February in the village of Jayyous in the Holy Land, as an ecumenical accompanier. These accompaniers are sent by the World Council of Churches to walk with the people of Israel and Palestine in their daily lives, especially where the tension in the country is making daily life almost intolerable. And so they stand watching at checkpoints between Israel and Gaza or the West Bank and by their presence may change the aggressive behaviour of some of the crossing guards to the Palestinian people - or they can report breaches of law or of human rights that they witness.

Cynthia will be in Jayyous, a village which is divided from its fields by the separation barrier, and will witness the people crossing daily (going many miles round about) to get to their work. She will also help run a creche which the older women run (funded by the Church of Scotland, as it happens) to let the younger women work and earn to support their families. God is working in the lives of individuals like Cynthia, challenging them to get out, break beyond the comfort zone and make a difference for others.

God is growing the church in numbers and in wisdom. You might ask where I get that idea from, especially the numbers, since we are always being told that the church is on the brink of collapse. But the scope of our vision is too small, we look too locally. In Nepal there was not a single known Christian in 1950, due to an official policy of expelling any Christians. But within 50 years there were six hundred thousand, and this despite the fact that many of these Christians faced a backlash, even expulsion, from their families. God is at work.

Or look at the way the churches in Africa have been growing since they have been less dependant on foreign missionaries to speak the gospel. This week at Presbytery we heard of a hospital in Uganda which also has to run a Bible College because people become Christian, go back to their villages and start a church, often knowing no more than Jesus saves them. God is growing his church all right.

And what have we seen in our own life-times? Even over the past few years? We have seen the growth of the Fairtrade movement, from a very much out-on-the edge idea to being a central part of how many people shop. Twenty years ago it was impossible to think that you would find Fairtrade products in every supermarket. Oh, and how did the movement begin? With concerned Christians.

Or look at the success of the Jubilee 2000 and the drop the debt campaigns. Not wholly achieving their goals, yet they have achieved far more than 12 years ago we could have hoped for. God at work.

And even now there is a campaign for corporations and businesses to stop being able to avoid paying taxes in the countries where they work. Like these other examples this has been taken up in wider society, but it began with Christians seeking justice for others. God's kingdom is really spreading when we see its effects and its principles being implemented beyond the church.

And so this advent we wait, with patience, not with resignation. We wait for Christ to return. We wait for the promise of Christmas to continually advance in the world, we wait for God's world to be remade in perfection. And our waiting is not passive, but active. James tells us to take the prophets as our role models: the prophets, who went on speaking the truth when no one wanted to hear it; the prophets whose words became accepted as wisdom only after their deaths; the prophets, who spoke out for the poor and the weak, who longed to see the healing of the blind, the deaf, the lame and the outcast lepers, who wanted to see the dead raised and to know that the poor had good news preached to them.

Jesus took the prophetic words as his starting place. As we wait for him, we should do no less.

Amen