Advent Sunday
27 November 2016

Waiting Hopefully
A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Reading: Isaiah 2. 1-5; Romans 13. 11-end; Matthew 24. 36-44

You may know the Walking Madonna sculpture outside Salisbury Cathedral. I encountered it last week. It’s by the artist Elisabeth Frink, and it is of Mary striding purposefully away from that monumental cathedral across the green towards the town. She has an easy air to her, her arms are swinging by her side, she has a freedom that is full of life. There’s an energy to her, a sense of attentiveness to where she is going and what she is about. She has left the heart of the cathedral and she’s making her way out, out to where she will encounter others. Where is she going? Who is she going to meet? What is behind the sense of purpose that is propelling her?

I was with a number of women clergy colleagues and we were invited to reflect on this dynamic statue as way to contemplate ministry. She was assured, hopeful, active. She makes you want to be in step with her and go where she is going. If ever there was an image of being ready, and engaged with the world, this seemed to be it.

I find it a very helpful image for us this Advent Sunday as we enter a new church year and this time when we are invited into purposeful, attentive waiting, invited to be engaged and fully present to all that is around us and open and attentive to God. It is also a helpful image for the church. Waiting does not mean standing still, or doing nothing, it is about opening our heart and mind and soul to God. Advent is a season where we wait in hope as we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ at Christmas in the miracle of the incarnation as God comes to share this life with us, as a vulnerable baby. In Advent, past, present and future come sharply into focus. We wait to celebrate in the present what has already happened in the past, and we are also invited to be people who wait for the future, the coming of Christ in the final fulfilment, when God’s kingdom truly comes on earth as it is in heaven. We cannot know when it will be and what it will be like. But we can be people who live with the expectation of God’s kingdom around us now, and long for it to come. That walking statue seems a hopeful way to imagine ourselves as kingdom people; people with a sense of loving attentive purpose for our world.

In our reading from Isaiah we are given a vision of the ‘new beginning’ of God’s kingdom that we are waiting and longing for. Beyond destruction and judgement Isaiah speaks with a message of hope and restoration for Israel. It is a vision of people set free beyond exile, to live in right relationship with God, walking in his ways. It is a vision of hope and renewal where ways of war are transformed to ways of peace; where enemies are reconciled. It a righting of all pain and a healing of all that is broken and distorted in our world; swords are turned into ploughshares, spears into pruning hooks. It is a vision of life where there is no terrorism, or refugee crisis, no Aleppo under siege, no food banks, or homelessness. The longing for this vision may feel very tangible this year and that’s where we set our sights over the coming days.

Walking in the light of the Lord means we are invited to look to the things that we recognise as disordered in our world and in our lives, and make our waiting this Advent a preparing for that vision to be made real. It is a call for faithfulness. God challenges us to find the reality of the future in the present, and take hold of the hope presented before us.

Our Advent booklet this year ‘At the heart. On the edge.’ is written by members of this congregation and shows us how in this community we are trying in our own way to live with that vision of God’s peaceful, life-giving kingdom. The reflections show the many ways that we seek to
be where God is. How we seek to be a community close to God’s heart, living God’s vision, walking in God’s light, most especially with those who find themselves on the edge, of our communities, of society, of life. And that is where we have met God. One person writes; ‘I had a profound deepening of faith in meeting and becoming friends with refugees who I was initially scared of and thought I couldn’t possibly relate to. As I journeyed as part of a wider group I could increasingly see Christ shining through them.’ We hope you will find this book of reflections a helpful companion, as you seek to be someone who lives God’s kingdom this Advent.

In our reading from Matthew’s gospel we are reminded that the coming of Christ’s kingdom that we long for has a sense of urgency and expectancy to it. We can live and work for it and make a difference through our day-to-day decision making, in the ways we use our time, spend our money, how we treat others, and what we stand up for and speak out about, in all our ethical choices, and it will overtake us unannounced. It will always surprise us.

All the people in the scenarios Jesus gives are simply getting on with their ordinary lives when this day and hour overtakes them. It’s a reminder that God’s purposes are at work below the surface of our lives. When life seems secure, it can be tempting to forget who we are before God, to go with the flow and forget our identity as those called to live counter-culturally, with the values of his kingdom. The Advent call is to be prepared and to live as people attuned to God’s promises and to his future, for we too, do not know the day or the hour.

Jesus inspires us to live wakefully in the present, like Noah building the ark on dry land, alert and open to the working of God in our lives, even when that seems to be at odds with what others are doing around us who may simply be indifferent to God’s presence. I wonder how you will live with the promise of God’s future in the coming weeks? How will it affect what you do and say, the people with whom you spend your time, your prayers?

Paul lives as someone attuned to the deeper purposes of God around him. He understands the urgency of the call. Time is of the essence. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ he says. It is our baptism calling to be clothed by Christ. Be someone, awake to God’s purposes, attentive and expectant, overflowing with love, someone through whom Christ’s light shines out.

Another image from Salisbury Cathedral can help us here. The font by William Pye is full to the brim with water, and from the four corners of its cruciform shape water continually overflows onto the floor. Around its edge are more words from Isaiah: ‘Do not fear for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name you are mine. When you pass through waters, I will be with you. And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.’ It is both an image of the overflowing abundant life flowing from the heart of God that we prepare to greet in the incarnation - God’s love overflowing and with us forever. And also an inspiration for us about how we are to live in a time of waiting. We live with all of ourselves, holding nothing back. Generously, brim-full and overflowing with hope and light and love. Completely open to all that God will lead us into. Like Israel and Noah, we will have our own exiles and floods and feel overwhelmed, but if God’s overflowing love is with us, there is nothing to harm us. I think of a friend waiting as her mum lives out her last days, of someone waiting for grief to pass, a prayer on our prayer board asking for strength as they wait for a new job. Our lives are all about waiting. Don’t hold back who you are until the waiting is over. It will be too late. If the statue of Mary is the inspiration for our purposeful attentiveness as we enter this season of Advent, the overflowing font is where our heart is, overflowing with hopeful anticipation for all that God can and will do, with us and through us, for the sake of his kingdom.