



Advent Waiting

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: Isaiah 40.1-11; 2 Peter 3.8-15a; Mark 1.1-8

We have our own John the Baptist figure here at St Martin's who cries out each morning, from first light. 'Big Issue', 'Big Issue.' Ron. I can set my watch by him. Ron features in the film about the BBC R4 St Martin-in-the-Fields Christmas Appeal with Hugh Dennis, speaking about his own experience of homelessness and the importance of the Connection at St Martin's to him and to his journey. Ron has a beard but that's about as far as he gets to the traditional image of a prophet. Last year we asked Ron if he would read at a carol service. He was too busy, he said, cooking Christmas dinner for his local homeless shelter, supporting others with his friendliness and encouragement.

Today the 88th Christmas Appeal is launched with its theme 'making a difference,' highlighting how important a relationship of trust and care and support can be for someone in a place of crisis or wilderness through homelessness. Ron is someone who knows the importance of someone 'being there' for him and now offers that to others.

These very first words of the Gospel of Mark, that we hear this morning are about the importance of relationship. We hear John the Baptist calling the people to prepare themselves for a relationship with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the most important relationship of their lives.

If you read the Gospel of Mark afresh, laying aside the other Gospels, it is quite a shocking read. Here we are launched straight into the imminent arrival of Jesus with no birth stories or nativity, no angels, or shepherds or stables, to gently cradle us. No Christmas as we know it. Instead we have John the Baptist with his message of repentance in the wilderness. And at the end of the Gospel there's no Easter in the way we expect it, no resurrection encounters. Staying with the Gospel in its original form we hear about the women coming to the empty tomb and being told that Jesus has been raised. They flee in terror and amazement and say nothing because they are frightened.

This gospel is full of misunderstanding, secrecy and confusion, and a Jesus who seems to struggle to convey the meaning of the truth he comes to bring, not wanting to be seen as just a miracle worker but inviting his disciples, those he heals and encounters to seek further. To meet him the one who is there for us in the deepest sense, someone who is in solidarity with us, who brings healing and forgiveness and a whole new way of living and who will change the world. And the disciples struggle to work out what that might mean.

With much of the Gospel written in present tense Greek, the time of Jesus' advent or arrival is 'now'. And so those first words of the Gospel: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ' are an invitation to begin again in our discovery of that good news in our own relationship with Christ who is 'there for us' now. And advent is the time to do it.

Rowan Williams has recently written an accessible new book 'Meeting God in Mark' and running through it is that theme of relationship. 'Mark wants to tell a story and present situations,' he says, 'that bring us up short. He doesn't want us to go away discussing the interesting ideas that Jesus

has or the poignant stories he tells. He wants you to focus on the person of Jesus and on the relation you might have with him...' ¹

In the stories of healing and enigmatic miracles there is an emphasis on the creation of a relationship with Jesus. The person is required to put their trust in him. To blind Bartimeus who is healed he says it is his trust in Jesus that has healed him. To the father whose son is overcome by convulsions he says do you believe (or trust) and the father replies, yes I trust you, I believe, help my unbelief. A relationship is formed. Again and again he encourages the person healed not to speak about what he has done for them but to allow the healing and the encounter to speak for itself, to the person concerned in their own life, and to others around them. It is the relationship not the healing that is key.

And so John the Baptist's message is to prepare for this relationship, to meet God in the person of Jesus who is coming to be with us. So how do we prepare? What is the quality of our waiting in this Advent season?

We prepare by making space. The place of preparation is the desert or wilderness. The place that will spring to life in Isaiah's visions - the experience of exile becoming a homecoming. The place where transformation happens. Where God's glory is revealed. The place in the Old Testament where Moses, David and Elijah each flee and the place from which Jesus too will emerge to begin preaching the good news.

Those who followed John were prepared to go out into the desert and to experience a baptism of repentance, literally a turning around of their lives, making a commitment to change their hearts and their actions. It's a calling for each of us. How might you 'go out' to prepare yourself? What might be the wilderness place for you where transformation might come?

It might be to create solitary time to read the gospel of Mark for yourself at the beginning of this new year in the church's calendar and encounter the strangeness and surprise of the text and through it the person of Jesus for yourself. It might be to explore the theme of our Advent Book 'The end of the World?' with its challenge of the four last things: death, judgment, heaven and hell – with the help of daily reflections. Exploring an experience of death that brings new life, aware of God's call to you to turn around in an aspect of your life that is liberating bringing forgiveness and healing and a new start, aware of heaven in amongst the ordinary, the joyous and the difficult, knowing Christ present with you.

It might be to spend time with something that you perceive as wilderness for you, a place of valleys and mountains. A relationship that is barren to you. A time of illness for someone you love and care for. Those things that anger you or upset you or cause you to despair in the life of our world and see how you might help to bring awareness or change. Whatever it is, commit to it and go out to it, and be open to how transformation might come.

Use this time of advent waiting. It is an active not a passive waiting. Be present to it – explore, discover, inhabit, wonder, listen for a voice you haven't heard before, open to where new life is coming, to where your relationship with Christ is being renewed.

I encountered a number of people this week who were facing loss, each in very different circumstances, but what was similar was the desire to meet God in that loss. It is often when we are at a low place, when our guard is down that our hearts are open to receive that relationship offered to us in Christ who meets us in the valleys. Perhaps our calling might be to be messengers like

¹ Rowan Williams 'Meeting God in Mark', SPCK, September 2014

John, and help someone to prepare their hearts to receive that welcome. To be the ones who help to prepare for Christ's coming not just in our own lives but in the lives of those around us.

What could be better a greater gift than to witness that turning in someone's life when they meet Christ or renew that relationship deeply. We cannot do this from a place of safety and security but when we risk our reputation, when we allow our neat schedule to be disturbed, when we let go of who we think we are before God, and discover who we could be, when we point away from ourselves to where God is, when we take time to 'go out' with people, and be involved in their turning, being in the valleys with them. Simply 'being there' matters.

In the second letter of Peter we're shown what the quality of our waiting should be. It should be about giving attention to what is holy and of God, aware of God's patience, who gives us all time to turn to him. It is about having a heart to wait with a sense of peace not worry.

Advent is busy, no more so than here, or in our own lives and homes, but it is supposed to be peaceful too. If we are at peace we will preach peace to others in joyful anticipation of meeting Christ. In joyful anticipation of meeting the God of relationship and patience and tenderness. The one Isaiah says who will feed and gather and carry and gently lead us. In anticipation of meeting the one who quite simply 'is there for us'.