



Born to set thy people free

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: Isaiah 2.1-5; Matthew 24.36-44

When I look ahead on this Advent Sunday, to all that lies ahead in the next few weeks as we journey to Christmas here at St Martin's, the first thought is 'how on earth to get through it'. The first line of defence is to steal oneself for the fray, with carol services coming along, one after another, like trains on the central line at rush hour. Not to mention preparing for family Christmas with all that that entails. At the same time, there is the call to go deeper and be more aware of the needs around us and across our world. Our own St Martin-in-the-Fields Christmas Appeal, for those who are in need around the country and who are homeless in this city, is launched next Sunday on BBC R4 and we hope that the response will be as generous as last year.

So what sustains and encourages us? In all of this activity the call of Advent is not just to '*get through it*', it is to be alive to the possibilities of hope, as we wait and prepare for Christ, who comes to set us free. It is a beginning, and the start of a new year for the Church.

In our reading from Isaiah we are given a vision of the 'new beginning' we are waiting and longing for. People set free to live in a right relationship with God, walking in his ways; ways of war turned and transformed to ways of peace; those who were enemies coming to reconciliation. A vision of hope and restoration – a righting of all pain and wrong - and a healing of all that is broken and distorted in our world; swords into ploughshares, spears into pruning hooks. No standoff between North and South Korea, no global financial turmoil, or students in confrontation with police down the road in Whitehall, no children's lives bruised by abuse. We are each invited to look to the things that we recognise as disordered and make our waiting a preparing for that vision to be made real in our own lives and in our world this Advent.

There were three women I spoke with this week who each taught me something about that waiting, preparing and longing. One woman is waiting for an appeal for asylum and is longing for peace in her life. As we sat and talked in our chapel downstairs she noticed the carved wooden statue of Mary that comes from Zimbabwe. Mary's face gazes with longing at the child Jesus in her arms. The peace so evident in that connection between them – it an image of a longing fulfilled. *This* woman is a long way from knowing that peace blossoming in her life. She is a long way from her own children. But she saw in this carving a vision of hope to hold on to. As someone who has known and is living with the trauma and effects of war, she is waiting for this kind of peace to take root in her life again.

Someone else who is exploring the possibility of a commitment to ordained life as a priest in the church, is waiting for a way to open up. Moving from a hunger to serve God, she has found herself, by surprise almost, embedded in a small parish in a socially deprived part of London, a great contrast to what she has known before. She is still waiting, but engaging with the lives of those God has put alongside her, just now. Her vision and hope have begun to be fleshed out in the lives and ways and difficulties of those she has been set alongside, as a member of the congregation in that parish, offering her gifts in practical ways. Now, there is a great sense of peace about her. Peace is coming from busyness and life and engagement with others. It is an active waiting and it is full of life.

In conversation with a friend, we spoke about hopes and fears for life, just as it is, and were drawn to the words of St Augustine that spoke of a righting of the way we see and engage with the world, so that we are aware of his kingdom already among us, *'Our whole business in life is to restore to health the eye of the heart, whereby God may be seen'*.

In the waiting for these three women was a desire to find peace, a longing to serve God, a need to see God and have a vision of life restored. There is deep within each one of us that desire for longings to be met. A desire for peace and of closeness with God. A longing for that vision of God's kingdom to come here on earth. And that longing is all around us, as I was writing this, the 7th Reclaim the Night march, was passing by in the street outside – women speaking out against rape and violence – voicing their longing to be set free from fear and violence.

From our 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, and it will overtake us unannounced. This awareness inspires us to be prepared and to live as people attuned to God's promises and to his future. Like Noah building the ark, it inspires us to live wakefully in the present, alert and open to the working of God in our lives.

Our theme for Advent this year 'Born to set thy people free' is reflected in our Advent Book of meditations, daily readings starting today to take you on that journey of waiting and longing as we journey these days to Christmas. As the small group worked on this book together, we explored the idea of freedom. There was a fulcrum that we tipped back and forth over. Freedom from and freedom to. Freedom from all that binds and holds us and our world; wrongdoing and guilt, and death and fear. And then freedom...to. Freedom to live. Freedom to love; holding fast to all the possibilities and promises of Christ. I hope that these reflections will help to tip you from the things that bind you, to the life that frees you, as you wait and pray, and discover for yourself the longings within your own heart.

What tips us forward is hope, the hope of Christ come among us. That even when we are the ones responsible for the binding and prisons of our own making, there is hope for forgiveness that Christ comes to bring us, for our lives with their mix of light and shade being made whole, for his healing and restoration, for Christ's promise where trust has been betrayed.

In our Advent waiting we may be called to that point where we are tied, knots in our lives created by our own desires and failures. We may need to stand penitent before God and know his forgiveness, rearrange our priorities so that our lives can be a place where his promises can take root and grow. We may be called to speak up for or help others who want to be free but cannot free themselves, because of the binding effects of poverty, or illness, or lack of opportunity, or because they have no voice.

Sometimes we are called to speak and pray and act in places we would least expect so that life can be unbound, and we can be set free by the promises of Christ. My colleague Richard Carter and I went to pray on the westbound platform of the Piccadilly line at Kings Cross, where Sonia, a much loved member of this congregation died recently. As we walked away it felt like a bird had been set free from a cage.

In our waiting and longing this Advent we open our lives to be a place where his promise of freedom can come, and take root and grow.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. Born to set thy people free.