

Advent 1 - Waiting

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Preacher: Rev. Clive Jennings

[0 : 0 0] Please be seated. Shall we pray together? Father God, be with us this morning, we pray, as we watch and wait for your coming again. Lord, we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

As, I don't know what your experience was as you spoke amongst your different emotions about waiting in different circumstances, and some will be waiting for a birth, some, as we think about this afternoon at three o'clock, as we meet, will be waiting and concerning themselves with maybe waiting for some respite in their bereavement. People are waiting for different reasons. I always remember my first job was in a factory. Well, it wasn't a factory, actually, it was in a printing works. And being the new apprentice, you sort of, you got, there was a thing you had to do to make you really humiliated. And what they did is they gave you a note, and you took to the stores, and written on the note was, a long wait. I didn't have a clue what a long wait was, but three quarters of an hour later, I suddenly realised what the request actually meant.

It's just amazing, isn't it, how this thing we talk about, waiting, waiting, and waiting all the time for those things that maybe cause a slight aggravation. Last week, Mike spoke about the almighty and awesome God, and that we communicate with, and that we worship. And I just heard, as Mike was speaking, that song that we sang together, in fact, is that our God is a great big God. Our God is a great big God. Our God is a great big God, and he holds us in his hand.

He's higher than you, and he's higher than a skyscraper, he's deeper than a submarine, he's wider than you, he's inversed and beyond my wildest dreams. And he's known me and he'd love me since before the world began. How wonderful to be a part of God's amazing plan. Amen? Amen.

You know, I hope you have experienced that awesomeness of God in your life, as we think on this first Sunday of Advent about getting our lives ready as we prepare in this season to welcome the coming King. And in the Creed, in the Book of Common Prayer, it says, and he shall come in glory to judge both the quick and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. No end. I hope you find confidence as you're waiting in that message, because after this morning's lectionary reading, his kingdom will have no end. That's really comforting. I hope you feel that along with me, because it's no surprise that Advent encourages us as Christians to watch and to wait for signs of his kingdom and his kingdom and his coming again in glory. It's an active watching and waiting, not sitting back. It's be alert, as we've heard in this morning's reading. And as we explore this waiting thing, now I don't know what your tolerance level is like for waiting. I see people smiling at me nervously, because if anything like me, I know what my tolerance is, because I don't know, companies must have invested a minuscule amount in the recordings that they make while you're waiting to have your call answered. I don't know whether you've experienced that. Companies where we listen and we wait on the phone between those immortal words that we hear. Our staff are busy dealing with customers at this time. Your call will be answered shortly. More music. Wait, wait, wait. Then comes the other verse, automatically, to which we hear, thank you for holding. Your call is important to us.

[4 : 1 6] This is where, to be honest, I start to become a little bit like Victor Meldry. I get to that point where, important, I've been waiting here for 50 minutes. I don't believe it. My last waiting experience was to the Department of Work and Pensions. I don't know what it was. Did they think that as a pensioner that I have all the time in the world to wait? And I got there to this point where it got, I'd heard all this for 35 minutes, and then at three minutes past six, our lines are now closed.

Would you like to phone us at eight o'clock in the morning when there will be somebody here to respond to your call? I don't know what you feel about waiting. The dangers as Christians like are waiting. Our patients can so easily run out. And we are in danger of switching off. We are in danger of giving up in the waiting. Worse still, we are not ready for the response.

Losing the will even to expect a response. Here in our reading this morning, we are told to expect that Jesus will come again. And here this morning, following on from the apocalyptic signs that so

many people get fixated on. People get fixated on these apocalyptic signs around the end times, taking God's place by announcing the time and the place and the year that he, the end will come, or he will come. You know, didn't they read today's scripture? It says, no one knows about the day or the hour, or even the angels in heaven, nor the sun, but only the father. Be on guard, be alert. Do you not know when that time will come? People have grown a whole cult around this thing. Did they not go back to scripture and get this idea that we don't know, but we know that he is coming? Even the Church of

England Synod couldn't even try to misinterpret parts of scripture like this, but, sorry, political line there. We don't know when, but we do know that Jesus will come again. We know that Jesus will come again.

At that time, men, women and children, will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power, and he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. This is what we're expecting. This is what we're looking forward to.

[7:17] This is what we're waiting for. This is what Advent reminds us of. Not just looking towards what is happening at Christmas. We are getting ready for Jesus to come again.

In Romans 10, 9, it says, tells us that we should be watching and waiting for the personal return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Don't know about you, I get quite excited by that thought of what that day could look like. You know, what are the signs? Where should we be looking? Have we been looking, or have we been less than alert as a church at these signs? And, you know, there is the talk about the fig tree, and we know from scripture that Jesus used the fig tree and models of this figuratively in so many times to talk about spiritual growth, death, life, faithfulness. We look for the signs of the kingdom. But can I suggest something which is a little bit radical? Are we looking in the wrong places?

You see, we think things are pretty dire in the world at this time, and they are. There is no doubting that. Yet the early church's collective worship took place in the shadow of occupation under the brutal regime of the Romans, a constant reminder that faith and freedom was under siege. We are in no different place. People of faith were waiting for a deliverer who would restore hope, justice, and fulfill the promises of God. Is that what we're waiting for still? I believe it is. And I guess, if you're anything like me, what I'm waiting for, too, in December 2023, is as we say, and as we say, and as we've sung, come Lord Jesus. Come Lord Jesus. We are waiting. We are ready. We are waiting in anticipation of what you bring. It seems there are all kinds of reasons to lose hope. You know, if the news isn't filled with bad economic forecasts, reports of wars, genocide, injustice, and cruelty, our ministers don't take responsibilities for their actions, blaming and shaming each other, which we've seen in the inquiry.

Our national church leadership is about to radically depart from an orthodox biblical truth, and we are effectively gagged from telling the good news of Jesus Christ in so many settings in which we go to. It makes waiting difficult, frustrating even, but hope can seem impossible, and justice can seem far off. Yet here's the good news, people. This Advent and Christmas, we'll sing, and we will hopefully be reminded and reassured in our carols that the hope and fears of all the years are met in you tonight.

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in you tonight. Jesus tells us the signs of his coming are found in the growth and fruit of the fig tree. That's what we've heard this morning. What are we looking for? Are we looking back over our shoulder? Are we looking forward to the signs of Jesus coming, which we've heard about in our scripture this morning? Now learn this lesson from the fig tree.

[10:50] As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happen, you know that it is near right at the door. Yes, by all means, let's look at the shocking state of the world, but let's not build our theology around it. Let's, as Jesus says, look forward to his coming and look for the signs that are there, that are right in front of us because remembering all the time that our God is a great big God, never leaves us or forsakes us.

And we also need to watch out at the growth in the twigs and the sign of that new life, which I believe is all around us. The season of advent of expectation isn't one to be annoyed. Can I suggest, like me, we look for the signs of that new life that's coming wherever it is. Look for the growth. Look for where the Holy Spirit is at work. Really exciting times. Helen Howarth Hemmer wrote the lyrics, and you'll probably join in with me in the verse. Oh soul, are you weary and

troubled?

No light in the darkness you see. There's light, there's light for a look at the Saviour, and life more abundant and free. Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. What a beautiful hymn.

Looking forward, looking forward to the light, looking forward to his coming. Are we looking and worshipping the light that his glory and grace will bring? Prophets foretold it, and maybe we need to be reminded. We need to watch for the signs as the prophets have told us again and again before Jesus coming. Like Micah, we are people who do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

By focusing on the basics, and it is the basics of our faith, we will enable us to watch and look for the new growth, for the way in which Jesus is at work, for the way in which the Lord is preparing for his coming again. And that may be small growth, as Russ talked about a few weeks ago about the seed. It may be just small growth, but it may be the bigger stuff as well. You know, we've just finished an offer. Thank you to our offer team that have been here. It was amazing to see that growth in people week by week by week by week.

[13:42] You just saw the Lord moving in people's lives. If that's worth ignoring some of the stuff, but actually looking forward and seeing the growth of people coming to Christ, are you watching for that in the community around you? And can I humbly suggest that if we aren't seeing it, maybe we need to watch a little bit closer and a little bit harder, because it's not far away, if that's what you're looking for.

In the film, Love Actually, with that great scene right at the beginning, as people arrive at the airport and they've come to welcome their loved ones, in the voice of Hugh Grant says over the thing, wherever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals hall at Heathrow Airport. General opinion starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don't see that at all. It seems to me that love is everywhere. Maybe in this Advent, rather than looking sideways and backwards, we look forward to the love of God and all that he is doing in our lives and in the lives around us.

It seems to me that so easily we can get diverted. And again, if this is a spiritual thing, which I believe it is, what would the evil one want us to do? He'd want us to focus on something that is not of him.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look forward. See what he's doing. See what he's doing in our lives and through our lives at this moment, because Jesus will come again. Watchmen or indeed watch women and young people have a great gift. Have a great gift in seeing this and speaking into the church.

[15:31] And we need to be there watching and waiting, as our scripture told us this morning. We see those who are influencing a generation. It's really interesting, isn't it, how in our social media at the moment, people are what they call influencers. In social media, what they do is they take a product and they use it, and they use it on social media to influence people, to get us basically to buy things.

I was thinking, thinking of the Christian influences that each and every one of us could be in the lives and the settings in which we are, as we watch for new life and we encourage people in the new life that we see. Maybe just in the acts of random kindness, whatever that might look like. Next week, this place will be filled with guides and scouts and brownies and all of those from our uniformed organisations. And each week, over 400,000 young people and 100,000 adult volunteers take part in scouting projects in activities across the heart of the UK community.

On a slide, Bear Grylls, as you know, is the chief scout. He is a survivalist and author. In October this year, Bear Grylls got baptised in the River Jordan.

He posted on social media for all those young people and their leaders and the world to see and said, it has always been a dream of mine to get in the water that Jesus was baptised in by my hero, John the Baptist. He then went on to post again and again that on the 9th of October, he added to the story and said that Jesus' baptism is amazing. It seems wherever Jesus went that new birth, new life and new vision followed. What a great message to talk about Jesus' coming again as people came to join him. In 2019, he released a daily devotional titled Soul Fuel, which shares how his faith gave him the purpose and the power to carry on through many of his survivalist exhibitions and expeditions even. The book's description says that it explores themes of hope, courage, risk, heaven and more. Think of the number, that's just not the scouting movement he's reaching. People

are buying this book. People are listening. People are hearing as he watches and waits for the coming kingdom.

[18 : 29] And he said, remember this, you have a light within you, the Holy Spirit, and wherever you go, you will bring a light greater than the darkness around you. What a phenomenal message.

Is that the message we carry? As we go out and we share that with people day by day, week by week, as we anticipate this amazing coming to get people ready. I don't know about you, I'm not into naming a date or a time, but as our scripture says, I want to be ready. Are you ready? Are we ready? Are we watching and waiting? Are we doing everything that we can to gather people as we've heard and think? Gather people together. Gather people into a relationship with Jesus so that when he comes again, that they will know and they will recognize him and they will be saved. The shepherds saw the glory of God and their lives were changed. Mary responded to the glory of God in her carrying and birthing Jesus.

And we too, we too, this Advent, can experience that glory if we look in the right direction and that is to Jesus. The light of the world. Scripture says, do not conform to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. And can I suggest what you are praying and watching for is often in that transforming of our mind to see what is coming. Emmanuel, God with us, he is the great big God. He is with us in the power and presence of his Holy Spirit.

Be on your guard. Be alert. Therefore, keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back, whether in the evening or at midnight or when the rooster crows or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, don't let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everybody, is watch.

[21 : 03] Shall we pray together? Forgive us, Jesus, when we have dated you and we have given up watching.

Lord, forgive us when we've looked in the wrong places and put our faith and our trust in other things rather than in you. Forgive us, Lord, when we've been complacent in our generation to make you known. Forgive us, Lord, when we have failed to bring others to meet with you.

So, Holy Spirit, would you come in this season afresh into our lives? Would you keep us alert? Would you make us watchful? Would you fill us with hope? Would you show us signs, large and small and wonders in our generation of your coming again?

And Lord, would you keep us held and fixated always by the light and power of your presence in our community? Lord, would you make us ready? Would you keep us committed? May our hearts and lives never grow tired of seeing more of you and of your coming again? Lord, we pray in our hearts, come, Lord Jesus.

Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.