

10am Sung Eucharist on Sunday 10 December 2023 – Revd Ceri Payne

Is 40:1-11, 2 Pet 3:8-15a and Mark 1:1-8 – the Lord waits patiently for his people to return to him and to prepare themselves for righteousness

May the Word of our God, which will stand for ever, be for us now both comfort and good tidings.

In Advent we look forward to the return of Christ as our King, and also, of course, to celebrating Christmas, and to present-giving.

Do you remember the John Lewis advert with the little boy, who we see watching the clock, every day in December, acutely aware of the very slow passage of time?

At the end of the advert, all our assumptions are confounded. We discover why the boy has been longing for Christmas: not to receive any presents himself, but waiting (perhaps not so patiently), to give his parents *their* presents.

Our assumptions about Christ the King are equally confounded by this morning's reading from the second letter of Peter. A reading full of oxymorons: words, and statements, and ideas, that seem logically inconsistent.

We might puzzle as to how, ***'with the Lord, one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day'***. This is not just about the God of eternity being out of time: a physicist can explain how relativity provides an answer to this apparent contradiction.

And we might account for how ***"the heavens will pass away with a loud noise" and "will be set ablaze" and "will be dissolved"***; or how ***"the elements will be dissolved" and "melt with fire"***, with help from a chemist and a physicist.

The Christian faith itself might at first seem to be full of contradictions.

Based on Christ who, ***"though in the form of God ... emptied himself, ... [and] being born in human likeness ... humbled himself ... [and was] obedient even to death on a cross"*** – and in doing so has won for us both forgiveness for our sin, and the complete victory over evil and death.

And our faith in Christ grows, as we come to understand why Jesus said that ***“those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for ... the gospel, will save it.”***

Today, let’s focus on the surprising news that what is holding back the coming of Christ to his kingdom is **the patience of our Lord**.

How completely unlike any earthly King!

If we want to compare Christ to earthly Kings, we could talk about Caedwalla’s retaking of the throne of Wessex in 685, or the restoration of Charles II in 1660, or the unsuccessful invasion of Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745. All of these - these earthly Kings - have always timed their return according to a calculation of whether they thought the balance of power was in their favour.

But our Lord God is not like any earthly king.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah, the Lord God will come ***“with might ...”*** and yet with all the gentleness of the shepherd who will ***“gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep”***.

Peter’s writing his letter at a time when people are already saying ***“where is this promise of coming? ... For all things continue as they have from the beginning of creation!”***

Peter’s response is to give us two reasons for **the patience of our Lord**.

The first reason for **the patience of the Lord** is that the Lord ***“is not wanting any of you to perish, but all to come to repentance”***.

Peter is writing to believers in Christ, but he knows that even though they have recognised and accepted Christ as their Lord, there are still many amongst them who need ***“to come to repentance”***.

For the Lord to give us time to mend our ways and to return to him is a potent sign of God’s grace to us. It is also an encouragement to us to make the most of this time before the Lord

returns. We have been given time in which to share with others what we ourselves have known and experienced of God's love and forgiveness, so that more people might come to know God's love.

We heard in our Gospel reading how people from the whole of the Judean countryside and Jerusalem were going out to meet John the Baptist, in the wilderness, and confessing their sins and being baptised.

But as John the Baptist was telling people, whilst he could baptise with water, those who would be baptised after the coming of Christ would be baptised with the Holy Spirit. As believers in Christ, brought into the family of God, through baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, they are equipped by the Holy Spirit to live in a new way.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, we become people whose lives show the difference that our faith has made to us. Not that we need to live good lives to earn our salvation, because salvation is God's free gift to us, but by learning to live good lives we are preparing for our new home in the renewed world that God has promised to us.

Because here we have the second reason that Peter gives for **the patience of our Lord**. The patience of the Lord gives believers the time to become "***the sort of people [believers in Christ] ought to be***": people "***leading lives of holiness and godliness***".

If you have ever prepared for an important visit or event – maybe an interview, for a job, or for university admission, or for an Ofsted inspection, who knows, perhaps even for the visit of a member of the Royal family to your department – you will know all about wanting to make a favourable impression.

But Peter is not talking here about making a good impression when the Lord returns; he's talking about change that goes much, much deeper. Believers in Christ are waiting for Christ to return, "***in accordance with his promise ... for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home***".

To be ready to live in righteousness, when the world is renewed, we need the sanctification that only God by his Holy Spirit can work in us.

That's why, whilst we wait for the Lord's return, "***we strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish***".

And as we wait, we work, with God, to play our part in answering our prayer that "***thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven***".

Here at Great St Mary's we do that with our giving: giving our money to the campaigns recommended by the Wider Concerns Group and giving our time, with the Pastoral Care Group or with other organisations, to helping the vulnerable and the lonely; the sad and the suffering.

And so, in another of those contradictions: we're both "***waiting for, and hastening, the coming of the day of God***".

We seek to hasten the coming of the Lord, when the first things have passed away and all things made new, and God will wipe away every tear; and death, and mourning, and crying, and pain, will be no more.

And yet, at the same time, we're conscious that the waiting is enabling us to change, and to become more Christ-like.

Let us be thankful for the patience of our Lord.

In the words of the absolution, from the prayer said at Compline, ***Lord grant us time for amendment of life and the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit.***

Amen.