

Advent 2 Mark 1:1-8

Can you quite believe that it is Advent 2 already? In such a short season it can certainly feel like preparation time running out! There is so much practical work to do, cards sent under pressure of final posting dates, gifts purchased, food prepared.

This morning's readings are doing little to ease our worries as they remind us not only that something is coming but there is likely to be little warning when that something happens. But it's not that we are left with no idea. There have been prophecies upon prophecies, It's just we don't know exactly when and how those prophecies will be fulfilled and part of our flawed humanity is a lack of patience. We are more and more driven to expect everything the way we want it now.

We know that's probably not the ideal way to live, parenting strategies talk about deliberately engineering situations which require children to wait and take turns because the instant gratification they crave is not always going to happen and the adults who cope better with that are those who have formulated strategies in childhood to deal with waiting. But it is also not God's way. The passage we heard from the second letter of Peter describes God's relationship with time beautifully. For God a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord is not bound by our time frames, but by eternity. Waiting is not a punishment for us but rather an expression of God's infinite generosity.

So we look back at the prophets, particularly today and try to focus on what they say to us. If we can accept that they stand even though many years have gone by, but that God is true to his promises, and we have no reason not to! Then those prophecies continue to be valid and helpful in the revealing of faith and the kingdom of God. This morning's readings brought us one of the iconic prophecies of the Hebrew bible, Isaiah's description of the voice crying in the wilderness. You could be forgiven for anticipating that the voice crying in the wilderness referred simply to some much needed words at a time when the word of God was in short supply. But of course, John the Baptist came and literally preached in the wilderness, living off the land in survival mode and dressing like a wild thing. The prophecy of Isaiah couldn't have come to pass more clearly than it did.

And yet, people missed the message. There were those who went to hear John and were baptised by him and waited with him for Jesus, but there were many more who perhaps heard John and thought, this is not for me, or this is nothing new, or, there's no way I'm repenting and turning my life around, I haven't done anything wrong! Even when the words of Isaiah came to life in their midst, many people explained it away or simply ignored it. The most telling of those were the religious leaders. These were the learned men who had studied scripture, who knew the prophecies inside out, who should have been on their guard, looking and waiting for signs that God was beginning his intervention. But they didn't like what they heard from John. They were quite comfortable doing things the way they had always done them. Perhaps they had waited so long they didn't expect it to happen to them.

By the time John the Baptist appeared in history the time for God's intervention was very nearly there. The waiting was coming to an end and the final preparations being made. But still so many people who had the opportunity to listen to him speak simply missed the message. It is as it ever was. Noah started building a boat and his neighbours scoffed, but the word of God is sure and trustworthy, we doubt it at our peril.

The people hearing John were woefully underprepared, and even in the time of Isaiah God knew it would be so, that was why a messenger was prophesied, that is why a messenger was sent. In the same way that December 25th creeps up on some of us year after year although on December 26th we know how long we have left and by September the shops are reminding us that it's just around the corner. If someone can be that unprepared for

Christmas day, when they know what will happen and exactly when, how much more work do all of us need to do to prepare for the next intervention of God.

Is it any wonder John the Baptist's ministry was so important? People had the prophets, they had their scriptures, they had John the Baptist who couldn't have fitted the description of one crying in the wilderness any better, and still there were those who said they were waiting for the messiah and let Jesus pass them by.

But God is not slow to fulfil his promise as St Peter tells us, but patient. We have our scriptures to guide us, and they are packed with pointers on what is still to come. Over these last weeks we have heard many parables that teach us about how to be ready for God, Jesus has been preparing us, prophesying to us. But how many of us will reflect that it's been a very long time since he said those things and it hasn't happened yet, and how many of us will find it hard to believe that we will see anything of God's intervention in our lifetime.

But remember, with God a thousand years is like a day and a day is like a thousand years. God works not in our time but in the timeframe of eternity. Perhaps we should be looking beyond our earthly lives too. If we believe that God will draw us to himself once this early life is ended, who is to say our work of preparation for the second coming of Christ ends at our passing. Whether we are ready at the end of our lives is nowhere near as important as continuing to try to get ready.

And if we lived as though the Lord was going to be amongst us again tomorrow, how much better would our lives be, and not just our lives but the lives of those around us. If we knew the Lord was to be by our side tomorrow we would make sure we had forgiven and were forgiven, we would put right the wrongs we knew we'd done, we'd let go of the little things because we would need all our energy to dwell in the excitement of God's presence. But there is no reason that we can't live like that anyway. Perhaps that is why we are not told precisely when the Lord comes again, because God doesn't want us to be tempted to delay our lives with him. Rather than wondering when he will come, we can live as though he were here now, indeed he is here now as the Holy Spirit dwells within each of us. Living like this will mean that should the Lord appear upon descending clouds next week we will indeed be ready to meet him.