



## PEACE AND WAITING ON GOD

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Advent 2

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This is the second of our Advent sermons about 'waiting on God'. Last Sunday Ellie linked 'waiting on God' with 'hope'. Today I'll try to link 'waiting on God' with 'peace', shalom. On the next two Sundays Tony and then Judith will preach about 'joy' and 'love'. So while they're rushing around doing their Christmas shopping (along with the rest of us), with joy and love, but perhaps not much peace, they too will be reflecting on 'waiting on God'.

Now those who live the monastic life don't do much Christmas shopping. Yet every twenty four hours monks live the essence of the link between Advent and Christmas. They rise daily before dawn and say the service of 'Vigils' at 4am or earlier. In darkness, waiting on God, waiting for the coming of the Light of day. Which mercifully always comes.

We can't have Advent unless we begin in darkness, the darkness of the world, a darkness which we Christians share but which does not define us. The Church's Year begins in that darkness, which we have to recognise in ourselves, and face it. The collect for Advent Sunday runs: *'Almighty God, give us grace to cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility; so that when he shall come again in his glorious majesty we may rise to the life immortal.'* We wait on God in that darkness, and God's light comes. The light of Jesus, our Saviour.

There are three 'waitings' in Advent.

The first is the waiting of the People of Israel for their Messiah to bring liberation, and 'shalom' or peace: the blessings promised in the covenants of the Old Testament. In the years immediately before Jesus there weren't many signs of those blessings. Roman occupation didn't help. In Advent, as children of Abraham

ourselves, we go back in spirit and join with our Jewish forebears in their waiting. And then celebrate that humble coming of Jesus the Messiah at Bethlehem.

The second 'waiting' is our individual waiting on God in our personal circumstances, now. From time to time we're overwhelmed by those circumstances, or by those of the people we love and the world we love. We reach out for peace, shalom. Sometimes for inner peace for ourselves, sometimes for peace for the world out there – whether in our home, or locality, or nation, or the Earth. We reach out to the Christ who comes alongside us in the present, and walks with us, again and again, whatever the circumstances.

Peace, shalom, has two aspects, inward and outward. We can experience a measure of outer peace but have no peace in our heart. Or we can experience peace in our heart while the world seems to be falling to bits around us. Or we can be torn apart both within and without, simultaneously. And yes, we may sometimes be so blessed that for a time we experience a taste of that promised fullness, inward *and* outward peace. Shalom, *the Biblical* understanding of peace, embraces both outer and inner. Shalom is that fullness of life which flows when we are in right relationship to one another, to ourselves, to the created world - and especially to the Creator, God the giver of life. Shalom, Biblical peace, is the harmony and wholeness of being community in God.

In the Scriptures, that single word 'peace', ('shalom' in the Hebrew Old Testament and 'Irene' in the Greek New Testament), has to do duty for the blessed many-sided fullness of life which is God's will for us. So it's very difficult to do justice to all its different aspects in the Bible. Above all, it refers to the consequences of being in right relationship with the Living God: Abundant Life. But it includes the end of all division and disharmony and disorder. It refers to cessation of war, cessation of hatred and conflict, yes; and also release from anxiety. Release from fear of famine and illness and death, yes, and also celebration of the fertility of the earth and of marriage, and celebration of family harmony and physical health. Release from the fear of natural disaster, yes; and also from social injustice and corrupt law courts. Later in this service as part of exchanging the Peace we say 'In God's justice is our peace'. Shalom converges with what Jesus in the Gospels calls 'eternal life' - 'the life of the age to come'.

And that brings us to the third 'waiting on God' in Advent. Though we sometimes taste that promised fullness of inward and outward shalom, such 'golden times' (whether for individuals or for a society) don't last, and we plunge back into

apparent darkness. The fullness of shalom is manifestly yet to come. Jewish writers have sometimes said, 'How can the Messiah have come already? Look around you - there is no shalom in the world.' And so the third 'waiting on God' is for **that fullness which comes with the Coming of Christ at the end of Time**, however we envisage that future coming. In the Eucharist we give thanks for all God's manifold gifts and then cry out *'Glory to you, Lord Christ, your death we show forth, your resurrection we proclaim, your coming we await.'* *'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come in glory.'*

Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans (8.22ff): *'Up to the present, as we know, the whole created universe in all its parts groans as if in the pains of childbirth. What is more, we also, to whom the Spirit is given as the firstfruits of the harvest to come, are groaning inwardly while we look forward eagerly to our adoption, our liberation from mortality.'*

Paul also speaks of 'peace' as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Here I think he's talking about the experience of inner peace in the midst of this groaning of creation and of our own inward groaning inspired by the same Holy Spirit. He's talking about 'the peace of God which passes all understanding', about the assurance of God's loving presence with us, an assurance which can descend on us as a sheer gift in the middle of the most excruciatingly difficult circumstances.

There's paradox here, tension here, precisely because we live in the overlap between two ages. The promised Reign of God, the Kingdom of God, has begun 2000 years ago with the life and death and resurrection of Jesus and the giving of the Holy Spirit. But that Reign, that Kingdom is not yet fully come until the King comes again with the fullness of shalom.

And so placed alongside the gift of this deep inner peace which can descend upon us or well up within us, this inner assurance of God's presence and loving purpose for us, there are two other things. Lament, and peace-making. **Lament** is profoundly Biblical, and it's part of our 'waiting on God'. It's been described as *'...a refusal to settle for the way things are. It is reminding God that the human situation is not as it should be and that God as the partner in the covenant must act.'* It's an act of faith, and the Bible especially the Psalms are full of it. And then there is **peace-making**, making shalom. Jesus said, *'Blessed are the peace-makers; they shall be called God's children.'* One could perhaps see this as God replying to 'lament' by saying, 'yes, the human situation is certainly not as it should be - and you as partners in our covenant must also act'.

The shalom, the peace which comes from God is not the enjoyment of a serenity far from the disorder and pain of the world. Nor is it a passive state of mind. It's dynamic. It's the experience of inner trust and hope which encourages and strengthens us to share in God's peace-making, God's action to bring shalom to this wayward and troubled world.

A word or two more about 'waiting on God'.

In this tension between our present life in God's world, and the blessed future we shall enjoy in God, we 'wait on' God. Not 'wait for Him' to act, though certainly we must do that with trusting patience. But 'wait on Him'. That means turning to Him each day in prayer, doing our best to place Him at the centre of our lives – now. And whenever else we pray, one key thing is to pray at the beginning and the end of each day. However briefly and simply. Finding a place (if we can) where we can be with God and be still and silent before Him. Centring ourselves in Him. Praising Him. Giving thanks. Offering our day to Him. Asking God to help us see our day and God's world with His eyes. Asking for His guidance and help and forgiveness. Hearing God's voice and reassurance and gentle challenge. Conversing with our Father in Heaven.

Faithfully trusting and waiting on God in this way is the path to His peace. But it will not be the path to passivity. There's a prayer in our Prayer Books which puts it well:

*God of peace, let us your people know that at the heart of turbulence there is an inner calm that comes from faith in you. Keep us from being content with things as they are, that from this central peace there may come a creative compassion, a thirst for justice, and a willingness to give of ourselves in the spirit of Jesus.*

That's a beautifully balanced prayer.

Let's keep our December as simple as we can and pray as much as we can and as simply as we can, and Advent and Christmas will come alive for us. Easier said than done, I know, but the Holy Spirit will make it possible if we let Him.

In the words of this morning's Epistle, 'May God, who is the ground of hope, fill you with all joy and peace as you lead the life of faith until, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you overflow with hope.'