



**Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Sunday 6 December 2020**

**Readings: Mark 1.1-8; Isaiah 40.1-11; II Peter 3.8-15a**

Leading up to this second Sunday of Advent, the season of waiting, I have been thinking about patience and urgency.

Life often requires us to be patient. Of course, in 2020 it became apparent as Spring gave way to Summer, and then again as Autumn drew on, that the coronavirus Covid-19 was not going away fast. We, and countless others around the world, would need to be patient. The news of vaccines over the past fortnight has been truly encouraging, but even so, patience is required as, in Cambridge, we inhabit Tier Two.

And patience is required for so much more of life. It was in the twelfth century that a medieval French proverb summed it up: 'Rome wasn't built in a day.' Quite. Much that is worth doing takes time. Those of you who write books know that all too well; how often a deadline gets missed! Patience is of the essence. So it is with mending a fractured relationship. Where trust has been damaged, it will not be re-established without patient nurture.

Patience is key to waiting, whether it is for the kettle to boil for a brew, for the doctor to ring, or for St Nicholas to call. That said, patience is not a complacent thing, less still is it a lazy one. Patient waiting is hopeful, in purposeful anticipation of what is to be. Moreover, although it is not always so, there is often an element of urgency to patience. The quest for a Covid-19 vaccine is surely a case in point, *we* wait patiently, as *scientists* research urgently.

Patience and urgency are basic to the Advent message, too. When we hear Isaiah's message of comfort, at the start of today's reading, patience and urgency seem to be hand in hand. The Jews are returning from exile in Babylon and it's demonstrably an exciting time. What is the significance of the word 'comfort' being repeated? Is that about urgency? 'Comfort' said once is rather soothing, but say it twice and there's a clamour about it: 'comfort, comfort'. And perhaps that helps us to see that comfort here is not as simple as it seems. It has two aspects. On the one hand Isaiah hears God offering the comfort of forgiveness: 'her penalty is paid.' On the other hand, it is the comfort of suffering ended: 'she has served her term' – a reference to that captivity in Babylon.

As always, the Bible's God brings suffering to end for a reason. The people are to prepare the way of the Lord. In a sequence of rich metaphors, we learn that preparing the way of the Lord is about making paths straight, so that diversions into godlessness are avoided. It's about flattening mountains of injustice so that none are treated unfairly. It's about making life's rough roads smooth, as we accompany each other through grief and depression. And those can be urgent things, that are ill served by a patience which too easily gives in to complacency in the face of struggle and suffering. So we have the sense of a God who on the one hand comforts by patiently offering forgiveness, and on the other by urgently pressing for righteousness.

Is there not something compelling for today's world in each of those interpretations? Do we not long both for sins forgiven and suffering ended? As we progress through Advent, what is being held out to us here is a brace of powerful notions. The one is that we are forgiven not through any good works of our own, but by the outworking of God's covenant love in the living, dying and rising of Jesus Christ. God patiently waits for us to accept that gift. As St Peter says in the epistle reading: the patience of the Lord is our salvation. And the second powerful notion we ponder through Advent is that we are forgiven not for our sakes, but to be used by God for the ending of suffering in our time. We are not in exile in Babylon, nor have we just escaped from anything like that. But we are in a Covid induced exile, far away from life as we know it, hemmed in by forces beyond our own controlling. And precisely in that situation, God calls us to celebrate being forgiven by working to end the suffering of those around us. We don't know much about St Nicholas, Bishop of Myra seventeen centuries ago, but what legends we do have, speak of a man committed to the those at the raw end of life: children vulnerable to abuse, young girls at risk of being sold into prostitution. However much truth there is in the legends, one senses a person who gained a reputation for patient devotion to the needy and urgent attention to their needs.

How might we be something like that? Speaking personally, I am aware that patience can be a virtue, but that it is all too easy to let it dull one to the urgency of issues that must not be ignored. So this week I have written to our MP about the United Kingdom's international aid budget. It is not a matter upon which we will all agree, but I am less concerned that we agree than that we heed the call to feel a passionate urgency about such things. Disagreement is fine, but apathy in the face of human suffering feels too much like *not* preparing the way of the Lord.

In Advent, may the Spirit grant us that patience which allows God to bring all things to completion in God's time, not ours. Meanwhile, may that same Spirit kindle our capacity for urgency so that we are tireless in drawing people back to God with winsome words and transformative deeds of prodigal love. That is what gives truth to the Advent plea, Come, Lord Jesus. Amen