

**“Waiting”: Sermon Preached at St John’s Devizes on
Sunday 6 December 2020 (the 2nd Sunday of Advent) by
Gerry Lynch**

Readings – 2 Peter 3:8-15a, Mark 1:1-10

*The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness,
but is patient with you*

At the start of the week, I had to order a few items from a major online retailer. I’ll not give it any free advertising by mentioning the name. Suffice to say it’s a firm called after a major river in South America known for, how shall I put it, being very *efficient* in tax matters. Among the items I procured is the new external mic for the parish’s tablet to improve the quality of our streaming, which I hope those of you watching at home are enjoying, as well as some cabling to improve the internet connection around the curate’s house.

I wanted the cabling to arrive before the Advent course started on Tuesday evening, and I was a bit annoyed that I couldn’t seem to find any delivery options earlier than Wednesday, even though I was willing to spend a few quid extra to do so. It’s absolutely ridiculous, after all, that in the middle of a global pandemic, I can’t have all my consumer desires satisfied within 24 hours.

Or, maybe not.

We have become a culture that has had our capacity to wait eroded by consumer industries that know we'll spend more with them if they can satisfy our needs instantly. I'm not enough of a hypocrite to stand up here in the pulpit and pretend to you that I don't love it, either. It is, however, only part of the story. For all of us life involves much waiting, not least when we are very young or very old, and for the most vulnerable among us life is largely a matter of waiting. We usually find ourselves waiting because we are in a situation where we are either dependent on others, or else dependent on circumstance and therefore in a situation where only God can help. Right at this moment, the whole world is in waiting in hopeful agony for the vaccines that seem set to deliver us from the nightmare that has been the year of Our Lord twenty-twenty.

To be human, in this world of matter, space, and time, is to wait. One of the gifts of this season of Advent is that it hallows and allows us to bring before God the waiting that punctuates our lives. After all, the Church has been waiting since the day of Ascension, waiting for the return of the Lord.

Our epistle this morning is from the Second Letter of Peter, which is very much a product of waiting – indeed a text which was written at a time when the waiting had become almost too

much to bear. Despite its name, it was almost certainly *not* written by St Peter; as early as the 3rd Century, Origen regarded its true authorship as a matter of doubt, as did Eusebius who wrote some decades later. Now, as I am not a scriptural literalist, I don't think doubts about the letter's authorship necessarily reduce its value to us. Firstly, I take seriously that all Scripture is God-breathed and written for our instruction, and that the Church was guided by the Holy Spirit in the process by which it decided conclusively on the canon of Scripture. But that does not mean reading the Bible as if it were instructions for a piece of flat-pack furniture. Scripture teaches us as much as anything else through the blind spots and misunderstandings of the people who wrote it, for we are human beings just like them, prone to the same mistakes, and especially prone to co-opting God for our own agendas.

The Second Letter of Peter was probably written somewhere between the last decade of the 1st Century and the second decade of the 2nd Century. By this stage, the apostles had passed on to their reward. Surely, people asked, Jesus had said some of the apostles would live to see his return? That moment had come and gone, and we see a community wrestling with both doubt and an evident degree of frustration. There is also a bit of self-contradiction, for along with the impatience we also see the slow

return of the Lord presented as evidence of God's patience, of His desire to save as many as possible. People are admonished to "regard the patience of our Lord as salvation".

This is a letter written by someone living in a world beset by injustice, and disease, and violence, longing for something better, saying "we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home". We wait still. This year we have seen that longing for a righteous world burst forth again, as urgently as it ever has done; yet the longing for righteousness remains unfulfilled. We wait, as they did nineteen centuries ago, for things more important than a delivery of consumer electronics.

This is the spirit of Advent, this longing for the world to be transformed into what we hope that it could be even as we wonder if it ever can be; this longing for God to make right what seems beyond our capacity to make right. Yet, as the old saying goes, it may be better to travel hopefully than arrive. Our waiting, as the author here says, may be what saves us.

Bill Vanstone was part of the golden generation of Church of England clergy who took Holy Orders after having fought in the Second World War. His contemporaries were the like of Robert Runcie and Hugh Montefiore, who universally saw Vanstone as by far the most intellectually gifted of all of them; yet he refused the high academic or episcopal offices that could easily have

been his, to work for decades in a council estate parish on the outskirts of Rochdale. His 1982 book, the *Stature of Waiting*, reminds us that in becoming human, Christ placed himself into the power of human beings; the all-powerful ruler of eternity made Himself someone who was done to rather than someone who did things. This is most obvious in the story of the Passion. Vanstone noted how the very language of both Mark's and John's Gospel, for example, captured this with a definite shift into the passive voice from the active once the Passion Narrative began. In today's Gospel reading, we see God in Christ subjecting Himself to human actions at the beginning of his public ministry, just as he would at its end. For Jesus does not begin His public ministry off his own bat, but waits for John the Baptist to proclaim his imminent arrival, and then to baptise Him in the Jordan. God incarnate submits himself to be validated by a mere mortal. It is as revolutionary a claim about the nature of God as we find anywhere in Scripture; God came into the world not merely to serve us and not only to save us but to be subject to us, to place himself entirely at our disposal; to wait for humanity to do its worst and then to triumph over it. John the Baptist is also someone who waits here, waiting on Jesus to come and bring to fruition what John could only proclaim; each of us must wait patiently in hope until everything comes together for the transformation of the world: even John the Baptist must wait.

Even Jesus Christ, who is truly God, must submit to waiting, for He is also truly human.

Waiting is an unavoidable part of the human condition, but we learn here that there is therefore something profoundly divine in the character of waiting also, even though it is often painful, frustrating, and even seemingly fruitless. When we wait, we wait with God; when we suffer in that waiting, God is with us in that suffering.

Hope and frustration and pain all mixed together: that is the mood of Advent. As we endure this hard winter where the hope of our impending liberation coexists with the isolation and fear of these dark and abnormal evenings spent enclosed within our four walls, allow yourself to touch God in your waiting. Wait with Jesus Christ, your brother, friend, Lord, and saviour, and allow him to wait with you in hopeful agony for the better world that is to be born, just as he humbled Himself to waiting for you, in Palestine two thousand years ago.

Now to the only wise God our saviour, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.