

God's Patience

A sermon preached by Revd Dr Mark Butchers at St Peter's Wolvercote on Sunday 7th December 2008 (the second Sunday in Advent)

The Epistle: 2 Peter 3.8-15a

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

It's often said that we now live in an instant world in which patience is in short supply. Rather than saving up for things, many people have got used to a "have now, pay later" mentality – an attitude which banks and loan companies have been only too happy to foster. We're an instant coffee, pot noodle, "why wait" society.

This outlook has of course infected our financial institutions in recent years. They have sought quick financial returns. And that has put great pressure on investment managers and city dealers to take reckless risks. As a result, credit has crunched, with all the knock-on consequences we're now facing.

Young people in our society are often sucked into the dream of instant fame and fortune. The meteoric success of popstars provides the dream; X Factor and the like provide the means of achieving it. Overnight success is more highly prized than the slow patient building of a career or a company, or long dedicated service in a caring profession. I generalise, I know, but not I think without some truth.

Over against this, our experience tells us that the things we have lavished most time and care upon are usually much more satisfying. The hard work put into GCSEs or A-levels or a degree gives a rich sense of achievement. Handmade presents – hand-sewn, home-baked, personally crafted – always touch the recipient far more than something bought off the shelf. Home-grown veg, carefully cultivated and harvested, not only tastes better, but gives us a quiet satisfaction: I grew that. But none of this is instant. None of it comes with "just add water" on the packet. It all requires perseverance and patience, and that seems to be in shorter supply than perhaps it used to be.

An impatient world, I suspect, also ends up being impatient with people - rather intolerant, rather unforgiving. Who for instance would be a football manager or a politician? With notable exceptions like Sir Alex Ferguson or Arsene Wenger, the turnover in football managers beggars belief. The pressure to perform, to get results, to win the silverware is immense. Politicians are under the same stress. Often, it seems there is no time, space or permission to make mistakes, to develop something gradually, to be human. We're just too impatient.

Indeed, when we do come across communities which are marked by patience, they stand out. We notice and admire them. Jean Vanier's L'Arche houses provide communities in which people with mental handicaps can be themselves, find a home and contribute to it and their local community. Emmaus houses offer accommodation and work for those who have been homeless, a way for them to find their feet again. Mother Teresa's order of nuns offer nursing care to the sick and dying in Calcutta and elsewhere. I could go on. All of these are marked by 'makrothumia', the Greek Biblical word for patience, or in other translations, forbearance or long-suffering. In other words, they're marked by the willingness to take the long view, to bear people in their particular difficulties, to share their ups and downs, their progress and setbacks. And all the time, knowing that true human growth and development can never be instant.

As you know, we are now in Advent. We're preparing ourselves for Christmas. But more than that, we're preparing for Christ's second coming and the inauguration of the fullness of God's kingdom. There are various ways of interpreting how that will happen. The end of time, the end of this world is one way. But another is seeing those ideas as alluding to our ultimate meeting with Christ, with God, when we die. Both interpretations lead to an encounter with God beyond this world and our current lives. And Advent reminds us of our need to prepare for that.

In many ways, this Advent preparation has an instant, impatient edge to it. We're urged to be ready *now* for this momentous encounter. In our Gospel reading, John the Baptist preaches an urgent message of repentance in readiness for the one who comes after him. In today's Epistle reading, we're told that the Lord will come like a thief in the night, at some unpredictable hour and that we should consider what sort of person we should be "in leading lives of holiness and godliness waiting for the day of God". Elsewhere, we're told we need to have oil in our lamps and our wicks trimmed and ready for the coming of the bridegroom. There is an urgency here, an almost impatient demand to be ready *now*, this instant, in case that moment of encounter is just around the corner.

And yet, how can I ever be ready for that? How can I with all my sins and frailties, my luke-warm discipleship, my lapses and failings – how can I be ready to meet my maker? I can't be. And no matter how much I try, I can never ever be ready or worthy. I can never be good or perfect enough to earn a place in heaven and stand tall before God. I

just can't. If Christ were to descend through the roof of St Peter's over coffee at the end of this service, would any of us be ready?

Thank goodness then for the words of the epistle about God's patience: God, we're told, "is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance". And at the end, we're advised to "regard the patience of our Lord as salvation".

That's music to my ears. The patience of the Lord is salvation – my salvation. Thank God. The patience of the Lord is my salvation. I interpret that as saying that God won't expect me to be perfect, 100% ready; and he won't condemn me out of hand for not being ready. He won't sack me for lack of results or mistakes in management. No, he will be patient with me, long-suffering, forbearing. Certainly he asks me to be open to him, not closed off – open to the possibilities of a new and deeper relationship with him in the next life. But he doesn't expect me to be the finished article, the 20-20 item, the immaculately airbrushed supermodel. And thank goodness for that. I can rest as me, warts and all, in the Lord's patience, and that is my salvation.

This isn't wishful thinking. It's not just ungrounded hope that God will be lenient with us on the Day of the Lord. Rather, it is securely rooted in Christ, the human face of God. Because when we look to Christ, what do we see but an incredible patience with those who were fragile, sinful, unloved and outcast? Yes, he set high standards and made big demands: love God with all your mind, heart, soul and strength and love your neighbour as yourself. But those demanding calls upon us go hand in hand with incredible compassion and patience. How many times did Peter get it wrong in his discipleship? And each time Christ patiently built him up again.

So when we stand before God, open to him, head bowed, aware of our failings, I believe that what Peter experienced, we will too: God's patience, his forbearance, his compassion and forgiveness. And in that will be our salvation.

Knowing and trusting in that, fixing our hope upon that, we can perhaps let God's patience shape us now, in this often impatient world. Sometimes we are impatient with ourselves, sometimes with others. We have high standards, rightly so. But that needs to go hand in hand with the 'makrothumia' we see in L'Arche or Emmaus or wherever: a forbearing, a long-suffering, a patient acceptance that I am fragile and make mistakes and that those I love are fragile and make mistakes and that those I find hard to love are fragile and make mistakes....And that all of us are patiently held, loved and forgiven by God. In his patience is our salvation. Amen.