

2nd Sunday in Advent, 10th December 2023

The Gospel lection for today tells us about John the Baptist. He was to ask Jesus a question which most of us have had to ask, or still need to ask. John asked, as we read in the Gospel of S Matthew 11:3, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” A word we can reflect upon this Second Sunday in Advent is the word ‘wait’.

In the prophecy of Isaiah, in chapter 7, verse 14, we read, “... the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” No indication is given of when this would come to pass. There is a sense in which God wants us to wait patiently. The people of old waited patiently for the birth of Jesus, so we should wait just as patiently for his coming at Advent.

Generally, today we are not good at being patient and waiting. We want things to get a move on. All aspects of life must be instant. Yet God expects us to wait patiently, the first adverb we can apply to our verb for today.

God had promised that he would send someone to be the herald of the Saviour’s birth. That messenger would be John, whom we know as the Baptist. In Luke 1:18-20 we are told the story of the Archangel Gabriel appearing to Zechariah. Gabriel said that Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth, would have a son. Zechariah’s reply gives us another adverb. Hear it as S Luke tells the story, “Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.’ The angel replied, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words,

which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.’”

We, like Zechariah, are to wait quietly, although God will probably not strike us mute for this to happen. In the quiet we are to listen for the still small voice of our God. It is often very difficult to find a place where we can be quiet. Noise invades every part of our lives; the noise of traffic, our families, our work colleagues, the TV, radio or CD player. This Advent try to find a place where you can wait for the coming of the Lord quietly.

Just as Gabriel had appeared to Zechariah, so a few months later he appeared to Mary. Just as Zechariah had done, so Mary asks, “How can this be?” The angel explained what would happen, ending with, “For nothing will be impossible with God.’ Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.”

S Mary’s response to the message of the Archangel suggests another adverb – humbly. She said, “...let it be with me according to your word.” S Mary accepted her role as the mother of God’s son. S Mary accepted the scandal and gossip which would have been the response of busybodies when she was seen to be pregnant. We should remember that in those days when a woman became pregnant without being married she would be taken to edge of the village and there be stoned to death by the villagers.

This Advent, as we wait, we should realise that God has a role for us too. God calls us to share the Good News of Jesus as we wait for his coming. That does not mean we have to make it a three-ring circus. We are humbly to share the fact that we have the words of Eternal Life, life in Jesus.

Our next adverb is given us by S Joseph. He was betrothed, or engaged, to Mary. He discovered that she was expecting a child and therefore decided to break their engagement. S Matthew tells us, “an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’” We are further told, “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”

S Joseph behaved in an incredibly faithful manner. Another adverb for this time of waiting is ‘faithfully’. Like S Joseph we should wait faithfully for the Advent of the Lord. By the standard of the world around us being faithful can often seem incredibly difficult. Nonetheless we should try to remain faithful, in other words firm in our belief.

A final adverb for us today, as we consider how we should wait for the coming of the Lord, is one which we tend to find the most difficult. David the shepherd boy was born in Bethlehem, just like Jesus. He did not stay tending the sheep, but became a mighty king. He did not, however, forget the lessons he had learnt as a shepherd. He wrote a song about shepherding. We know it as Psalm 23. David the King knew that even he had to follow the shepherd obediently. Even a king is a sheep in the flock of the Lord.

You and I are the Lord’s sheep. Our shepherd provides us with all we need. He leads us through danger and keeps us on the path to heaven. At the time of Jesus, a shepherd would be the one who went ahead of the flock, which was usually quite small, to find some grass growing in the desert conditions

in which they lived. At night the shepherd would move his little flock into the safety of a small sheep fold and would then sleep across the small gap in the wall through which they had entered. All the shepherd expected was that his small flock would be obedient to his leadership. It is as if Jesus is saying to us: “Sheep, follow your Bethlehem shepherd obediently.”

We thus have this time of preparing for our annual remembrance of the birth of Jesus as we wait for his second coming. We have found that our waiting should be done obediently, faithfully, humbly and quietly.

And so we wait. We ask, with John the Baptist, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” We wait obediently, we wait faithfully, we wait humbly and we wait quietly for the one who is Immanuel – God with us.