

FULL OF EXPECTATION

→ The words that we have heard from both passages of scripture this evening are fairly familiar ones. The Mark passage is often read at this time of year and of course the Luke passage is read every year in carol services up and down the land as we retell the Christmas story. But, I wonder if you knew that two of the verses from the Mark passage were actually quoted in the “Ghostbusters” film? Verses 24 and 25 were apparently quoted as part of an attempt to explain the build up of ghost activity in the city of New York!

..... Even within the church context we may well wonder why, in this season of Advent when there is a great deal of good cheer and joy around as people look forward to Christmas, we are subjected to these passages of scripture that seem to speak of doom and gloom? Why, in this season when we are preparing to celebrate the coming of Christ in to the world as a vulnerable baby, are we encouraged through our lectionary readings to think about his coming again?

.....Well, perhaps it has something to do with the fact that we live in the “in between” times. Christ has come, but he has not yet come again. He has come and revealed God to us but do not yet know God fully. So we have to wait and waiting can bring with it both a sense of expectation and a sense of frustration. Waiting can fill us with anticipation or dread. Most of us probably really dislike waiting – it feels like such a waste of time! But is it?

→ Our dislike of waiting is evident everywhere you look. When you’re in the supermarket, you often find that the self-service checkouts or the express checkout lanes have longer queues than the other checkout points because we’re attracted to the notion of getting out of the store more quickly, even if in reality we don’t! We get impatient as we wait for traffic lights to change and you watch cars continually nudging forward as if that is somehow going to make the lights change more quickly! We record television programmes and then speed through the commercials or the boring bits of the programme so that we can get to the bit we really want to see. Maybe there are even some of you who can’t wait for the sermon to finish so that you can get back home for your lunch or your tea?

..... Perhaps we spend so much time getting annoyed and agitated with the idea of waiting that we forget there can actually be joy in that time. There can be purpose in it and it can actually be fulfilling if we use it correctly. William Congreve, the poet and playwright once said, “Uncertainty and expectation are the joys of life.” I’m not sure how many of us would agree when we find ourselves in the waiting room at the hospital or stuck at a red traffic light, but

→ In this passage of scripture from Mark’s gospel we are being encouraged to be alert, or to stay awake or to watch out. Five times we are made aware of the need to do that in the last six verses of that passage. Usually if Jesus repeats himself then it means that we need to listen very carefully. So, when he repeats himself it’s not time for us to get weary of it and switch off, but rather to sit up and pay attention to what is being said.

.....It's almost as if, at the beginning of the Christian year, in this season of Advent, we are being invited to begin at the end of the story. It's a bit like starting to read a book by reading the last paragraph first. But perhaps we are encouraged to start at the end because by looking forward to the time when Jesus will come again, we place ourselves in the mindset of those who were waiting for Jesus to come the first time.

..... For those who lived in the time before Christ came into the world, there was a constant looking forward and waiting for the Messiah to come. Every time another country occupied the land of the Jewish people, they looked to God to send the Messiah who would save them from the people who were oppressing them. So, as the first century Jewish people made their way to their home towns for the census, they were no doubt grumbling and wondering when God would save them from these troublesome Romans. They waited in great anticipation and of course, most of them missed it!

.....We think of this season of Advent as a time for preparing ourselves for Christmas, but we are also reminded that we are waiting for Christ to come again and in this time we are told to stay alert, to watch out, in order not to miss out and in order to stay alert, our waiting needs to be active.

.....There's a huge difference between passively waiting and actively waiting. If you're standing in the queue waiting for a bus that's simply going to take you to work or to college, then you may not be thinking about anything in particular. You may not even be looking forward to the bus arriving and getting on except that it might get you out of the cold! But if you were standing on that same piece of pavement waiting for a procession or a parade in which your children or grandchildren were going to appear you may have a very different sense of anticipation. You'd be looking forward to seeing them. You'd be imagining what they might look like and how you might feel as you see them go by. You may be wondering what the hold up is if the procession doesn't arrive on time. You'll be making sure that your camera is ready for taking photographs. There is a sense of anticipation and expectation in that kind of waiting.

→ When we think of things that we wait for, many of us can relate to the expectations of a new mother, or new parents. Mary was expecting her first child but it came at a time when pregnancy outside of marriage was particularly taboo. If it was not for the love that Joseph had for her and the fact that he was somehow convinced that all would be well after the angel had spoken to him, Mary would have been left high and dry to have the child and raise him on her own.

.....But she did have Joseph to support her and share the myriad of emotions and feelings that are experienced whilst waiting for the birth of a child. There's excitement and joy. There is also trepidation and unease. There may be fear and anxiety. And amidst all of those feelings there are things that need to be done; doctors appointments to be attended, nurseries to decorate, baby supplies to be purchased and so on. Life begins to change and everything focuses on that time when the baby will arrive. And in a sense that's exactly what we are doing here in Advent – in these weeks of waiting leading up to Christmas.

.....There's so much going on around us that points to the fact that Christmas has already started. There's already so much business and chaos – we remembered that in church on the morning of the very first Sunday in Advent, and even at that point many members of this church family had already put up trees or bought and wrapped all their presents or written all their cards. Yet, whilst the world's December rush may point towards Christmas, it doesn't necessarily point to the Christ child.

.....The main purpose of this Advent season is to prepare. This season actually asks us to sit back and understand that our lives are or can be different because of God coming to this world as a human baby. But if we get caught up in the hurry and rush of December, are we really prepared? Are we truly ready for the coming of the Christ Child? Are we alert enough to recognise the signs when he breaks into our lives?

→ We actually have the privilege of living in this unique time in history. We live in the now and not yet. We live in this in-between time. Jesus Christ has already come into the world two thousand or so years ago and he promises that he will come again. In the mean time we have access to his teachings, to his life and example, to his miracles through the Bible but the time when all things will be made new, hasn't happened yet!

.....But what does all that have to do with our waiting? What does that mean as we prepare for the Christ child? Perhaps it means that our task is to be a bit counter cultural. It's hard, when all the pressures around us are to do what everyone else does and put up the Christmas tree early in December and go to loads of parties before Christmas and get all the cards written as early in the month as we can. As we've already reminded ourselves this Advent, December 25th isn't the deadline or the finishing line. It's actually the starting line. Christmas is a twelve day season that begins on December 25th and ends on January 6th or Epiphany. Yet so often we are drawn into the race to December 25th and then suddenly it's all over. Instead of preparing for and expecting the Christ child who will make a difference to our lives every day, all we've done is just get ready for Christmas Day and all its celebrations.

.....This is a naturally hectic, hurried and chaotic time of the year. It may seem impossible to believe that God can bless or even be found in all the parties and school plays and shopping and wrapping and writing and eating that we cram in. Yet, if we go back to the very beginning of the Bible, to the opening verses of Genesis, we hear this, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." There was one thing that existed before all others – chaos! I don't know how else to describe an earth that was formless, empty and dark. Whatever you might call it, chaos seems appropriate to me. Yet out of the chaos God created everything; the day, the night, the sun, the moon, the earth, plants, animals and eventually us. God looks at the chaos and the impossible and sees possibilities.

→ No matter how busy our lives may get during this season; no matter how chaotic it may feel, God still sees possibilities to create something good from it. Mary's pregnancy was disordered and confusing. She didn't know if her fiancé

would stand by her. She didn't know if her family would still want to know her and then there was that lengthy journey to Bethlehem to contend with. Yet amidst all that chaos, God put on flesh and came and lived among us. Everyone in Bethlehem was rushing around at that time too because of the census, and in their rushing they missed the birth of the long awaited Messiah.

..... Will we be ready to celebrate Christ's coming when December 25th arrives? Will we be ready to welcome Christmas or the Christ child? As we actively wait with great expectations, my prayer is that you let God in and allow him to make a difference to how you choose to spend this Advent season. Let God into this journey filled with expectations. Let God transform this time of waiting. Let God create something beautiful out of the chaos that you may be experiencing right now. Getting ready for any major event takes work – we look forward, we get excited – but there are also things that we must do in order to be ready to really capture and enjoy the moment. May we be appropriately active in our waiting so that we are ready to experience our God who is already in the world, and who comes to us and longs for us to welcome him into our lives.