

## **May I speak in the name of God ...**

Whenever the church bears herself in purple vestments it always means that serious questions are being set forth and that we are drawn into facing the great connections, the deepest mysteries, the principles of universal truth. Today I wear my purple stole, I preach from this purple dressed pulpit, and I will celebrate Communion with the bread and wine kept there under the purple burse and veil. These signs leave no doubt that by entering this Advent season we are invited to prepare and consider the sometimes darkened mystery of Christian truth and promise.

Advent must surely be one of the most counter-cultural seasons of the church. While the rest of the world is rushing ahead with Christmas, the church instead marks the time, it sets the scene, it deliberately slows down. The season of Advent reminds all Christians, and indeed the world, that the very best things cannot be rushed into and that there is real merit in waiting. It is a spiritual discipline to learn how to wait well.

Waiting has become something of a dirty word in our society. In a society filled with fast food, fast deliveries, and fast communications, waiting has become synonymous with inconvenience, frustration, and poor service. Waiting tends to be forced upon us when our ideas of how things should be don't materialize quickly enough. At it's worst it leads to discontent, distemper, and disappointment.

This is what was happening at the Church in Thessalonica. This new gathering of Christians had readily imagined what they thought the Gospel, and in particular the promises of the coming Christ, were supposed to look like. And yet, when they looked around they found that their members were still dying, that their leader Paul wasn't available, and the Roman political elite were still persecuting, they entered into that impatient and fearful form of waiting. They became a congregation in crisis because their expectations of things being right had collapsed spectacularly. They were not at all happy.

This was a serious problem for Paul.

He realized that their anxiety and discontent had caused them to be distracted from the Gospel and in his letter to them, one of encouragement, one of hope, and one of faith, he urges them to realign their sights on what the Gospel really means.

He seeks to restore whatever is lacking in their faith with prayer. Praying that they may be directed by God, that they may restore their misplaced energies in loving one another and that God may strengthen their hearts in holiness so that they may wait well.

The spiritual discipline of waiting, which all this purple and these texts remind us of this Advent, is dependent on what lies at its heart. To wait well is to focus on waiting faithfully, with open-ness, with trust, and with hope. Waiting well means to believe in the promise of God. The promise that we hear in both the Old Testament and Gospel readings.

'The days are surely coming, when I will fulfill the promise'. Jeremiah writes of God. 'Be on guard that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life' Jesus says to His Disciples.

The interesting thing about all three of our readings today, and the way in which they translate into the present day context – whether local or global – is that they do not shy away from naming the difficulties that we witness around us. The world is turbulent, difficult, and at times frustrating and scary, but we mustn't ever fall into the trap - like the Thessalonians - of thinking that this indicates a failed experiment or exercise of the Gospel. Somehow there is a paradox to be lived in – balancing the now and not yet. We can bear with the present day anxieties because we trust that God's promise is sure. We have to do this because we live in between the first and the second coming of Christ which is the whole backbone to the Advent season.

By all means we can seek to resolve the struggles that get in the way, but we must do so in the power, gentleness and love of God, do so with his promise upon our hearts, do so while still looking to him for his strength, guidance and love.

This disposition of waiting well, guards against fear and hopelessness becoming the dominant narrative in our hearts because they only ever lead into a form of waiting that is utterly contrary to the Gospel.

May we all this Advent, use the penitential purple-ness to honestly lament and reconcile with God over all our frustrations so that we may not be overwhelmed by them. May we be gifted anew with the eyes of the heart to see that even in the failings of the church, the world, and ourselves, there is always that glimmer of hope on the horizon, the relentless and assured promise of God coming in Christ. May we again commit to learning how to wait well, to wait with faith, to wait with trust, and to wait in a hope filled love.

I'd like to close with these words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a priest who had to master the art of spiritually waiting well from within his concentration camp cell, from where he wrote

"...And then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. Our eyes are at fault, that is all.

God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succour in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives."<sup>1</sup>

**Amen**

---

<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, God is in the Manger, Reflections on Advent and Christmas