

## *Words of hope and expectancy*

Revd Dr Ray Williamson  
Advent Sunday, 29th November 2009

Advent Sunday might be the beginning of a new church year, but for me personally it has often been a day of significant change. Thirty years ago, Advent Sunday was my first Sunday in the parish of Morpeth; two years ago, it was my first Sunday as Acting Rector of St Luke's Mosman; and now today it is my last Sunday with you as the Acting Rector here. A day of significant change indeed! But any change also means the emergence of something new — although sometimes it may not be immediately apparent what that might be: we may have to wait and see.

Advent is an important and significant time in the Church's year, and we often say it is a time of waiting. But that probably does not have a great deal of appeal in our society. It is not a very attractive word. Ours is not a culture that is very used to waiting. In fact, nowadays, it appears to be more and more counter-cultural. Our prevailing consumer ethos does not consider 'waiting' to be a virtue. An early credit card advertising slogan was "Takes the waiting out of wanting" — capturing perfectly the promise of a piece of plastic to release us from the misery of scrimping and saving, and to offer instant gratification.

It is a slogan that still governs a great deal of the way we behave. Much of our daily lives are built on not having to wait. Fast food, speedy broadband, one-click internet shopping: the gap between wanting and waiting has never been smaller. And so waiting seems negative, waiting seems perhaps passive, unexciting, the boring bit before we get to the exciting bit.

But this talk about waiting is not just a matter of advocating self-denial for the sake of it. It is not just a matter of saying we should learn to wait, to be patient, because waiting is good for us no matter what. Clearly, some kinds of waiting are not and never will be good or constructive: being caught in a traffic jam and not knowing what is happening; a delay on public transport and no one tells you a thing; or the terrible waiting for news of someone who is in hospital. These are experiences born of impotence — situations in which we are powerless, passive, where it is impossible to do any more than just... wait! They are situations of waiting, in which we are in the hands of others, in which we have no ability to shape the outcome. They are characterised by a sense of helplessness.

There is a sense of helplessness reflected also in the gospel reading today. The word *aporia*, may sound like an unpleasant skin condition. But it is not. It is a Greek word found in that passage, and it refers to a state of mind in which every train of thought hits a dead end; it suggests a state where one is completely unsure, a state of uncertainty, of helplessness.

The gospel reading today is from Luke. It is the first day of a new Church year, the third year of a 3-year cycle, the year of Luke. So we will be reading a great deal of Luke's gospel in the next twelve months. Luke has a richer vocabulary than the first two gospel writers. So he often finds an unusual word, an apposite turn of phrase, to capture what is going on in the story of Jesus, or to express the exact force of something Jesus said.

Here, he tells us that Jesus said that we shall experience *aporia*. We shall no longer feel sure about all that once had seemed so certain. So, in the 21st century, it is quite extraordinary to hear Jesus speaking about *aporia*. If this is an age that is not good at waiting — where the waiting has to be taken out of the wanting — it is also an age of uncertainty. For many people now, it is no longer possible to trust the 'grand narrative' — any system or story that claims to give an all-encompassing account of things, and that gives meaning to life. We are, indeed, reduced to *aporia*.

Luke has another graphic detail, all his own, about what Jesus said: "People will faint from fear and foreboding". And indeed, we recognise again how this speaks to our times: people are fearful. There are specific fears: fear of what is happening to the planet; fear of the bomb on the bus or the plane; fear of difference, and a deeper more pervasive fear — the fear of what cannot be identified or named.

What Luke says in this passage this morning about what was anticipated in his time can resonate with all that confuses and frightens us in our time. Advent tells us to stay with those feelings — but not without hope. We have begun the season of Advent this morning with the lighting of the Candle of Hope.

So it invites us to look at our world and our society and our culture, to look at all the signs of impatience, of uncertainty, of fear, and then to look beyond them to the small signs of hope.

Now it is quite deliberate that on the day we light the Candle of Hope we also turn our attention to the Christmas Bowl appeal. The first Christmas Bowl appeal was in 1949, 60 years ago — and through all those years it has been one of those small signs of hope. So, this morning, you have been given a Christmas Bowl envelope, with an obvious invitation to respond to the appeal this year and thereby support the three areas of the Church's mission in which the Christmas Bowl is involved: assisting in emergencies, responding to injustice, and supporting development and poverty reduction.

Since our journey to Jerusalem, you have heard quite a bit by now about the situation of the Palestinian people, especially those who are refugees — people who, for 40, some for 60, years have been displaced from their homes. You have heard us speak also of those who languish in the refugee camps and how they still long to return to their homes. I am very pleased to be able to tell you that as a result of our 'Report Back' evening here and the donations made by the travellers themselves, we have \$1,450 to give to the DSPR. (Department of Services to Palestinian Refugees). It is a special addition to what is contributed from the Christmas Bowl in support of that work of the churches in serving people in those refugee camps, not least in Gaza. It is a way of bringing a glimmer of hope and a degree of dignity into the lives of people who are desperate in their poverty and powerlessness.

The season of Advent invites us not only to wait, but also to hope, and to act in hope.

During Advent, Christians go back to that time of waiting as the Bible shows it to us. We read again the prophets in the Hebrew scriptures. We read about how people were longing for an end to slavery, longing to be back home in some sense, longing to be at home with God again, longing for reconciliation. And all of that is expressed in the most powerful metaphors, especially in the Book of Isaiah, metaphors about the desert blossoming, metaphors about the rain falling, metaphors about day dawning after there has been a long, long night; and also especially in the words of Jeremiah (as we have heard this morning) — his metaphor of a righteous Branch, as a sign of promise, a sign of hope.

The kind of waiting and hoping, of which Advent speaks, is not marked by powerlessness and passivity. They are actually very different. This kind of waiting and hoping is not passive, but active. Advent is really a time of preparation, a time of taking stock, of taking control of the time ahead, looking forward, planning, and deciding what our priorities ought to be. One Advent hymn advises us to "watch and pray" — to use this season, the space between the promise of the coming of the Christ and its fulfilment, as a constructive period of discernment and action.

The waiting and hoping of Advent go together. The essential ingredient of the Advent kind of waiting is hope. Advent is a time for stepping aside from other pressures to see how things

could be, if only we had the courage and the vision to see the world from God's perspective — to see a world transformed by the power of love. That kind of reflection enables us to make the kind of space in our lives where waiting is not just about wasting time, or getting frustrated and impatient, but a way of measuring ourselves against the challenges and opportunities to come.

And it is the challenges and opportunities that we find hope. For hope there is. Just as Luke depicts more graphically than the other Gospel-writers how dark the sky might become, so it is Luke's thrilling voice that speaks most exultantly of the light of the new day. Only Luke has the tremendous summons: *When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing nigh.* These are the words of hope and expectancy that we also have to proclaim in these days.

May this congregation here at St Philip's continue to proclaim them!