2 December 2018: Choral Matins with University Sermon
Advent Sunday
Isaiah 51: 4-11, Romans 13: 11–end
The Rt Revd Guli Francis-Dehqani, Bishop of Loughborough
‘In praise of waiting’

“It is now the time for you to wake from your sleep … live honourably … and put on the Lord Jesus Christ … The night is far gone and the day is near … our salvation is nearer than when we first believed”. These words from Paul’s letter to the Romans, part of the brief reading we’ve heard this morning, steer us into Advent - that four-week period of waiting before Christmas. The short passage that these words are drawn from has a sense of urgency and expectation about it that is indicative of the context in which it was written. Paul was writing around 57 or 58 AD, barely 20 years after the events surrounding the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. As the early church was just beginning to come into existence, Christians were living with a real belief that Christ’s return was imminent. They were preparing for his second coming and so the question about how they spent the time until then was very significant and alive for them.

Inevitably, nearly 2000 years later we’ve lost some of that sense of anticipation. Most people are unlikely to think much, if at all, about the second coming. And as the immediacy of Christ’s return has faded so too our understanding of what it means to wait has shifted. And so I wonder what the idea of waiting conjures up for you? Do you associate it with feelings of impatience or boredom, of time being wasted? Or with a sense of panic, perhaps, of time running out? Might it raise feelings of fear – a dread of what is to come, or excitement for a longed for occasion? I guess it will be a combination of these things but it strikes me that for the most part waiting in itself is seen in negative terms, particularly in a consumer culture where increasingly there is an expectation that if we want something we can get it very quickly indeed. Waiting is to be avoided as much as possible and when it really is unavoidable it’s simply the necessary space between now and the moment we have our eyes fixed on, which may be one of dread or pleasure and excitement.
What the Christian understanding of the Advent period tries to do is to emphasise the present – the here and now - by attaching meaning and value to the waiting itself. Advent shifts the momentum of waiting so that the present is neither future focused – always looking impatiently or anxiously for what is to come, nor is it simply reliving the memory of the past. In advent we are encouraged to see waiting as something positive and alive with possibility - not just a passive gap between what’s been and what is to come. That’s not to say it’s easy. Advent is a time of waiting in darkness; of facing the pain and the hurt in our lives – dwelling with them and allowing ourselves to be formed and reformed. A little like a baby grows in the darkness of a womb, is fed and nurtured and prepared to face the world, the darkness of advent beckons us into a deeper relationship with God in which we are nurtured and fed, growing in love and compassion and gradually becoming those who in turn reach out to others in compassion and in understanding.

If we widen the lens and zoom outwards, thinking expansively of Christian history as a whole we might see ourselves again as living in a waiting period - a time between the birth of Christ on one hand and the second coming on the other. Divine love has already broken through in the event of Jesus and we have glimpsed its reality even as we await its final fulfilment when God’s kingdom will be revealed in all its glory. This isn’t wasted time for us to sit around and dwell on what’s been, or simply long for that which is to come. We are called rather to live the present moment fully and to recognise that we have a part to play in bringing about the longed for future. And this present – the here and now - which is so precious is permeated and shaped both by the past and the promise of the future.

Let me try to explain what I mean. A Christian understanding of remembrance looks back to past events not just for the sake of renewing an old faded memory, but to draw those events into the present, giving shape and meaning to our experiences now. That’s what we do week in and week out when we celebrate Holy Communion. We pull the past events of Jesus’ death and resurrection into the here and now, where they impact our present reality, inspiring and motivating us. Equally in our worship and in our praise we capture something of God’s promised future, lifting it into the present and celebrate it as if it were happening now. So past and future collapse, and infuse the present with divine possibility, stirring us to become those who influence the shape of things to come.

And St Paul invites us to live in the present honourably, not in drunkenness, debauchery nor in quarrelling and jealousy. I don’t take this to mean that we are to be killjoys –
earnest and boring and forbidden from having fun. But I do understand it to mean that we’re to align our wills with the will of God through the choices we make, the way in which we conduct our relationships, the courage with which we speak out against injustice and participate in action for change; how we use our skills, our intellect, and our money wisely and generously. We each have the possibility to influence the world around us in small but not insignificant ways and as we do so we become co-creators with God, bringing into being the kingdom here on earth as it will one day be in heaven.

This living in the present moment, dwelling in the here and now, finding meaning in the waiting, is an art that must be practiced, a habit to be instilled. It won’t happen magically unless we attend to it. If we spend our time dwelling on what’s been we stagnate. If we spend our time looking only to that which is to come we can’t fully experience it when it arrives because that in itself becomes the present whose only purpose is to point us to what might be next. So, let us pray for courage to embrace the here and now, to rejoice in what we’ve been entrusted with and to use it well. Let us pray for God’s blessing; for the wisdom to seek his face in the darkness of advent and to hear the whisper of her voice in the silence of waiting.

I’d like to finish by reading a short poem by the twentieth century welsh poet and priest RS Thomas who captures in a few lines far better than me the theme I’ve been wanting to explore. The poem is called Kneeling.

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun’s light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.
Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.