

How long, O Lord? Psalm 13.1.

Today in our Advent Carol Service we celebrate the coming of God in the Lord Jesus to this sinful world, a dark world which desperately needs God's light. Our first readings from the opening chapters of *Genesis* tell of the Fall of man, when Adam and Eve thought they could live without God. Nothing has changed because today the vast majority of people still think they can live without God. We've pushed God out of our personal lives, out of our politics, out of our work and then blamed him because the world is a terrible place. Poor old God! He really can't win, can he?

And yet over the centuries human beings have been yearning for a better world. Countless generations have instinctively felt that the way things are is not the way things ought to be. There is a better way - surely? Some have tried to take things into their own hands. Armed with their utopian visions they have fomented revolution. When they stormed the Bastille on 14 July, 1789, the French Revolutionaries imagined that they were finally bringing in the new world order where there would be liberty, equality, fraternity. Of course, it all went wrong, as all revolutions do, because the revolutionaries failed to see that they were part of the problem, not part of the solution. Immanuel Kant had correctly diagnosed the human problem: human beings cannot straighten the warped timber of human nature. The Bible would say that sinful people cannot save sinful nature.

But however misguided and naïve the world's revolutionaries and political dreamers are, their yearnings

and longings for a better world are correct. The Bible invites us to look in the right place for salvation; to look to God himself. Only he who stands outside of us can make things better.

The Jewish people knew this. For generations they had been waiting for God to send a Messiah, his specially anointed one, who would bring in the new order. Our reading from *Isaiah* 25 records their vision of a better world:

*On this mountain the Lord almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples... On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples... he will swallow up death for ever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces...*

The trouble was that after all this waiting, when the Messiah *did* finally come, they missed him. Another of our readings from *Zechariah* 9 foretells:

*Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

After all that waiting, they missed him, and the Jews still miss him. He wasn't what they were expecting. A baby born in a stable? An uneducated carpenter? A common criminal crucified on a Cross?

That's the trouble with waiting, isn't it? You can wait so long that you miss it when it comes. We human beings have a real problem with waiting. We are impatient. We want it now. It starts with tiny children, doesn't it? Remember taking the children on holiday, and every five minutes from the back seat you hear, 'Are we there yet, Dad?' They can't wait for Christmas. They can't wait to be teenagers. They can't wait to

leave school. They can't wait to leave home, because they hate you, and then they can do whatever they like!

I'm not sure we so-called grown-ups ever get out of this. It amused me to hear doctors getting all self-righteous about people smoking in cars because it does so much harm to other people. I can't ever remember doctors campaigning to ban cars themselves. Motor cars are the biggest killers of all time. Why? Because people can't wait. They're too impatient. Someone's getting in their way. Road rage.

There are a thousand reasons why we have a drugs and alcohol epidemic in our society. A lot of people just want to forget. But many take drugs because it's the quickest way to get them to the pleasure zone. We can't wait, can we?

Happiness is an elusive thing. It just happens, and cannot be possessed and turned on when we want. But we don't want to hear that, so we do it through pills. We're in control now, or so we thought at the beginning. We don't want to hear that it takes years and years of hard slog to learn a language or to play a musical instrument well. Give it to me now.

That's why we our society is massively in debt. We won't wait till we can afford. Give it to me now. Here's the credit card. No-one says it, but actually our financial woes are a moral issue. And it's not just wicked bankers over there. It's us. As a society we thought we could have endless stuff without having the money to pay for it. We wanted it now, and couldn't wait. It was childish, and we're paying for it now. We're being forced now to be grown up, and we don't like it.

But even we believers become impatient. Way back in the Psalms King David cried, 'How long, O Lord?' Another Psalm (94) asks, 'How long will the wicked be jubilant?' Habakkuk the prophet whines, 'How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?' The Bible is nothing if it's not honest, is it? Haven't we all asked this question? 'How long, O Lord'? Get on with it, Lord. Clear all these bad people out, and make this world a good place. Why are you dithering? Are you even there, Lord? Is *anyone* there?

There's a saying: 'Be careful what you wish for'. The last book of the OT, the prophet Malachi warns us:

*But who may abide the day of his coming? Who can stand what he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.*

How long, O Lord? We can't wait, but we are just children.

'Are we there yet, Dad?' God's timing is perfect. He came to us in Jesus in that stable in Bethlehem. Most of the Jews missed him 2000 years ago. Most of our people today have decided to miss him also. But he is coming again. For the wicked and godless, the Christ-rejecters and arrogant sneerers, it will be a time of wailing and gnashing of teeth. For those who have been patiently waiting, the Second Coming of our Lord will be a time of joy, for he will then, in his perfect timing, bring in what we all have been yearning for, the new heaven and the new earth when he will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will then be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away. This is what we are waiting for. 'Lord, quickly come. *Maranatha!*'