

## The Revd Canon John Roff

Date: 01.12.24  
Sunday: Advent 1 yr 3  
Reading: Luke 21, 25-36

This truly is a wonderful place in which to wait. My eyes travel up the pillars beside the reredos. My heart leaps at the intricacy of the plaster ceiling. Just the very size and scope of the place lifts my mind in preparation for meeting God. In the short organ voluntary, and then the brilliant improvisation on the first hymn which, Jonathan we are going to miss so much, brilliant in musical simplicity, yet brilliant too as an aid to our preparation for this act of worship. I am, yes, waiting, but I think watching too. And then we expect ..., sounding from the ante-chapel with its fabulous acoustic an introit designed to lift our hearts and minds – yes, worship in this place begins, worship I have been waiting and watching for. I value so much the 10 or 15 mins before the service to commune with and be still, watch, wait.

Several times in recent weeks now my watching and waiting has involved locations beyond our wonderful chapel here. How is it to try and meet for worship in a war zone, in a place of acute famine, in a country where Christians are persecuted. And how is it to be alongside worshippers of other faiths waiting, hoping, faithfully to meet God. I have been taught when I pray rather than to have my hands like this, to have them like this signifying an openness and a waiting for God's coming in our prayers.

I've taken several groups at 8 o'clock in the morning to the place supposed to be the Upper Room in Jerusalem. A small donation to the Custodian sitting at the entry door has given our group of perhaps 30 people exclusive use of this evocative but bare site. We have sat or stood simply in a circle to consecrate the bread and wine and passed it round to each other, waiting, watching, remembering – "is it I, Lord?" The travelling communion set we used was issued to a Boar War chaplain, A. Shilitoe, in 1896. Think of the circumstances he used it in – frightened men? homesick men? men gathered in a tent, a mountain top, a captured building? And in the 50 years of my ownership of that set, then communion beside someone who is dying, beside someone who has lost their mobility, communion in numerous people's homes on red letter saints' days, all sorts of different intimate circumstances - people deliberately watching and waiting. And Advent Sunday is a prop to be sure we are doing this to the best of our ability.

But I think we do well this morning to try and refine for ourselves what it is we, alongside millions of followers of Almighty God in many different circumstances, are waiting and watching for. Certainly, in the Hebrew Bible they expected a Messiah. They thought of it as a very grand occasion that would be unmistakable. Aramaic translations of the Old Testament have more than 70 references to Messiah, building a powerful picture of a Davidic king restoring Israel in all aspects. For various cultural and historic reasons teaching had been built up that the coming of the Messiah would be unmistakable, and more majestic than anything seen before.

Our Christian Bible documents give us to understand that the vast majority of people of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Before the common era were looking in the wrong place of unspeakable majesty. Certainly, we should not be haughty, or condemnatory of the people of that time – given all that we know we too would be looking in the wrong place.

But the Christian church has had 2000 years to watch and wait for something different. Our so-called New Testament speaks of a Messiah who came among us in real time, revealing God with crystal clarity, healing, offering membership of a new kingdom that transcended the world, utter simplicity. It is an understanding that commands kingdom of God citizens to unite people who are both high and lowly.

For the millions of members of the worldwide Christian church the Messiah has come, but our Christian bible speaks of a return of Messiah too – perhaps to correct where we have got it wrong, perhaps to encourage and restate where we are getting it right, perhaps to draw the present age to a close.

The feast of Christmas was first in England in 597, in Rome in 336, - some think it was given a fixed time before this, - but once a fixed date for Christmas was determined, then it became natural to want to prepare for the coming of Jesus.

Advent was quickly divided into two parts - the first two weeks would be reflecting on the Messiah's return. Disciples

would chasten their hearts, confess sins, and spend time hoping for the quick coming of the Lord. The last two weeks would then bring a change to help us focus on the first *coming, parousia*, Christ in the manger. This double focus in Advent history seems very significant indeed - Advent and Christmas point to our place laid out in time between the Resurrection and Second Coming. Advent and Christmas are not merely about the coming of Jesus, but they surely encourage us not to forget there is something more, more for you and me. So wait, and watch!

But, and this is such a big BUT for me, am I like my religious family of early times, am I looking in the wrong place? We are thrilled to accept that through the coming of the Christ child we are given a place in God's kingdom. The membership of this kingdom comes through changed hearts and minds and the simple sharing of God and his love amongst all those we come upon. Military victory is not the Messianic way.

So if this is where we saw his first coming, isn't it as likely - or more likely still - that this is where I should be looking for the second coming? I wonder if Charles Wesley's hymn that we will all enjoy singing as our service ends this morning

“Lo he comes with clouds descending, thousand thousand saints attending” somehow keys in to our seductive thinking – “well there will be a second coming because the Bible says so – but I’d be very, very surprised if it is in my lifetime”!! THAT is precisely my fear of looking in the wrong place.

Watch and wait; remember and look forward. Perhaps with due diligence we will find the Messiah coming again as we encounter a hungry person in the next few weeks and feed them. Perhaps we will meet the woman at the well, the man beside the pool of Siloam needing a little support towards his healing, the prodigal son needing to know he is not condemned for all his life. In these places won’t we see the Messiah coming again? Advent, for 4 weeks, watch and wait, and please don’t allow yourself to spend valuable time looking in the wrong place.

To the one who has shown us God and will do so again and again, be all honour and glory, now and for ever. Amen