

Witney Benefice's generally ultra-slick mechanism for generating staff marching orders for services far into the future is subject occasionally to the odd cough and splutter. So it was last week in respect of our service today and I found myself unexpectedly moved off the bench to give the sermon – to my particular delight. Particular delight, because this First Sunday of Advent is a very big day for the Church of Sweden with which I have close connections, as does this benefice through its partnership with Voxtorp.

The importance of this day in the Church of Sweden might surprise us for whom Church attendance on Advent 1 is not much, if any, higher than on a normal Sunday, I would guess. But our sisters and brothers in Sweden have been fretting about the recently imposed limit of 8 people at a gathering, including church services, and how that's going to feel for them today when very large congregations are still the norm on this Sunday of the church's year.

So maybe we can see this service as in part a vicarious celebration for our disappointed friends in Voxtorp and set ourselves alongside them in spirit. And indeed, I had hoped to turn the liturgy rather Swedish with a couple of Swedish hymns and the Gospel usually read on this Sunday in the Swedish Church, but I felt the touch of a velvet-gloved restraining hand. And fair enough, I suppose, because the Swedish gospel and hymns for today, would feel very odd to us. The gospel, from which the traditional Advent hymns draw much of their language is the narrative of Christ's triumphal entry, for us a Palm Sunday story in the approach to Easter, not an Advent story in the approach to Christmas. It would be odd for us to sing Hosanna today.

That said, and given the fact that Witney's excellent custom is to offer richly varied liturgies not wholly constrained by the norms of Common Worship, I might have risked even the painful impact of the iron hand within the velvet glove by pushing the Swedish case further. I might have pointed out that in the Book of Common Prayer the Advent 1 reading gives us Matthew's triumphal entry, as in Sweden: the Swedish arrangement is not some perversity, after all – the Entry into Jerusalem a major coming of Christ – just how major I hope to demonstrate later. I might even have made a Brexit point about how this liturgical variation towards the Book of Common Prayer would be a generous gesture to some of our European friends, yet one completely consistent with English nationalism. For is not the Book of Common Prayer the spiritual roast-beef of Old England? Before I went down that perhaps slippery path, though, I checked and found that actually the BCP reading wouldn't have effected a real Swedenisation of our service. In BCP, crucially, Matthew's chapter 21 is followed through into the cleansing of Temple, which doesn't happen in the Swedish liturgy. It's crucial because the cleansing of the temple is an act of judgement and our Church of England Advent is thoroughly conditioned by the idea of judgement in a way that Swedish Advent isn't. The Swedes did judgement last Sunday which they call Judgement Sunday. It makes a lot of sense to close the Church Year with the Last Judgement and to open the New Year on the first Advent with pretty much unalloyed hope and joy. We prefer to run judgement over into Advent, as if we can't get enough of it,

However, at the meeting last week when, as is our, again, excellent custom, the Benefice Team discusses the Gospel reading for the coming Sunday, we seemed rather to want to say goodbye to the judgement theme as served up repeatedly by Matthew over the last few weeks; and we seemed to feel that that farewell was pretty much appropriate as a response

to Mark's Gospel passage today. There is here indeed no wailing and gnashing of teeth which Matthew has on his calling card and no explicit dividing of people up into sheep or goats or wise and foolish bridesmaids. But there are enough Eeyorres in the Witney team for questions to have been raised about those not elected, and what happens if people don't stay awake. What happens if the master is kept waiting by a sleepy and tardy doorkeeper. What happens if God doesn't give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armour light? Are we going to be among those deeply wailing when we the true Messiah see? I think these are fair questions but the Tiggers of the Team won the day and we closed our discussion with a perspective on Mark's passage that saw the coming of the Son of Man as a great good thing, which of course it is, the prospect of which should have us tingling with joyous excitement. Which is actually all rather Swedish...

And you certainly can't - and shouldn't try - to do Advent without joy, if only because it is the run up to the joyous feast of Christmas with which it will certainly end. In that respect, Advent is not a time of anxiety and insecurity and our waiting even if mixed with tones of apprehension should be filled with joy. This year Advent has been invaded in a good sense by the Covid situation which has now acquired an Advent shape. Covid has occasioned suffering and dread and brought with it a shaking of what we thought were the secure foundations of our living, but the time is coming - here we don't quite know the day or the hour - but we *do* know that the time is coming when our deliverance from the scourge will be effected - now is our salvation nearer than when we first anxiously hoped for it. We do have still to wait and not without anxiety, but that anxiety is now framed by a hope we justifiably believe will soon be realised and so we can now wait with some degree of joyful expectation and excitement. This situation outside the Church, I think, should help us to inhabit Advent well, as our Advent liturgy will help us to inhabit the Covid situation well.

But with whatever feeling or blend of feelings we wait, the waiting is critical.

There's a wonderful book called *The Stature of Waiting* by W.H. Vanstone which should be on everyone's Advent reading list. Very short, very rich, very cheap - £6.25 from Amazon or £3.89 on Kindle, in fact - you see, I really want you to read it - very cheap but priceless. The key idea is that the glory of God in Jesus is revealed less in his mighty acts and more in his handing himself over to be acted upon - by us. The almighty God, whom he might well suppose not to be subject in principle to the bidding of anyone or anything in the universe, nevertheless chooses in Jesus to enter into the condition of passibility - empties himself, takes the form of a slave, becomes obedient not only to the Father, but to us and, waiting on the decision we make, opens himself to the possibility even of death on a cross. God does this because God is love and it is a mark of perfect loving, as Common Worship's Marriage Service reminds us, to give all that one is the beloved, for them, in principle, to do with what they will.

Vanstone sees God's being handed over to us, his waiting on us, as investing human waiting on others, and human lack of agency in general, with a divine character - hence the *Stature of Waiting*. It's a way of seeing things that might give us pause as we chaff in these Covid times against the restrictions on our liberty to act as we would choose; might give us pause as we insist on our right to do what we want, might encourage us not to see the dignity of

human being as inextricably linked with a capacity for agency, since that is not the case with God, might give us pause as we seek restlessly to assert our will and to exert control.

The waiting we impose on ourselves in the Advent season is a handing ourselves over, giving ourselves up to what we cannot control, (we do not know the time and the hour, we wait on God's decision), it is a season for the exercise and development of patience, of gracious self-surrender and how good to be able to understand that condition as a reflection of the experience of the God who waits. It is an enrichment of our Advent joy.

But the deepest element of our joy in the Advent season of waiting is provided, I think, by meditation not on our being like God in waiting but on the primary fact that God is a God who waits on us, who hands himself over to us.

To adjust a question I put earlier - how long would the master of today's gospel wait for a sleepy and tardy servant to open the door. I think the answer is 'as long as it takes' because in Jesus God has handed himself over eternally to us and waits for our response our decision, waits upon our treatment of him, waits in love. And waits, I think, eternally. God will not flounce off impatiently – he is perfect at patient passibility – God will not flounce off as we drag our heels in coming to him. This perception offers different terms for thinking about judgement, suggesting that judgement is up to us, not God. We can, if we so wish, persist in our self-assertive resistance to the God who waits on our decision, waits for us, and we will inflict suffering on ourselves as we do that. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. But faced with that eternally waiting, that eternally loving God, can we resist for ever? It is certainly not God who will crack first.

And so you will forgive me for pointing out that one of the Epistle readings for Advent 1 in the Swedish Lectionary is Jesus' description of himself in Revelation standing at the door knocking, waiting for a response. The passage does not occur in our lectionary, not in Advent – not anywhere, I think. And, if I may test your capacity for forgiveness further, offering you another opportunity to align yourself with the divine, let me end by pointing out that Jesus' historical handing over of himself is irrevocably initiated by....his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem.

Advent. Here's to next year - in Sweden!...