

Patience as Salvation

A sermon on 2 Peter 3: 8-15 & Mark 1: 1-8 by Nathan Nettleton, 10 December 2017

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Message

For both God and us, time can drag when waiting for change, but patience is salvation when forgiveness is offered as a means of change rather than as a reward for change.

Sermon

As we get into this season of Advent, questions about our relationship to time come up a lot. They come up in the Church's preparations as we think about anticipation and hope and what it means to live now in view of an anticipated future salvation, and they come up in the wider community's preparations as frantic end-of-year festivities rev up all around us and people try to cram more and more shopping and more and more parties and more and more family commitments into less and less time as the days rapidly count down.

And yet, at the same time as those who haven't yet done their shopping are feeling that time is going too fast, there are thousands of children gazing longingly at the enticingly wrapped presents under the Santa trees and feeling that the time seems to be taking forever. And in one of the readings we heard tonight, the Apostle Peter suggests that God experiences that same paradox of time sometimes seeming to go too fast and painfully slow both at the same time.

"Do not ignore this one fact, beloved," says the Apostle, "that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day." We often notice only the second half of that: that the Lord can see a thousand years as if they were only a day. But the first half of it suggests that sometimes the Lord experiences time like those kids wondering whether the present opening day will ever come: every day can seem like a thousand years.

But what is it that God is waiting to unwrap? The context makes it quite clear. God is waiting to unwrap the new you and the new heavens and new earth. God is waiting to unwrap the fulfilment of all that God has been doing in creation and salvation. God is eagerly waiting to see you become all you were created to be and all that Jesus lived and died to enable you to be. God is waiting to see it all completed and perfected and ready to be unveiled and fully enjoyed.

But just like they say that a watched kettle never boils, some times it must feel like you are never going to get there. It often enough feels painfully slow to us, but how much more so to God who is so much more eager to see the job completed that every day waiting can feel like a thousand years?

The Apostle Peter gives us this image in the midst of some teaching on our expectations of the the end of the world. Just like Jesus, he takes the usual sort of apocalyptic imagery that was in vogue at the time and rather than toss it out and start again, he works within it, tweaking it in important ways as the Church began to find its way to a new understanding of the end times in light of their new revelation of God's nature and purposes in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The aspects of that changed understanding that Peter is focussing on here are captured in the idea of patience. First he says, "The Lord is not being tardy, but is patient with you, not

wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.” And then a few verses on he says, “regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.”

Regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. That of course is pointing back to the first line. The patience of the Lord can be regarded as salvation because it shows us that the Lord is not wanting anyone to be lost, but is wanting everyone to have every possible chance of getting on board the lifeboat of salvation.

You see, the big change going on here is that previously it had been common to imagine that God was rather looking forward to seeing sinners burn, and that the final day was a day when God finally got to unwrap his favourite present – a big flamethrower and a squirming cauldron of sinners to try it out on. But Peter is urging us to see that in Jesus we have discovered that God is not like that at all. We had God all wrong. God is doing everything possible to hold back the tragic consequences of our own self-destruction in the hope that every last one of us might take the way of escape that Jesus is holding open. The big finale is not a day of vengeance, but a day to welcome everyone home, freed and forgiven.

We can see something of this change when we compare these later teachings with the preaching of John the baptiser. As we heard in the gospel reading, John “appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Get the order there? Repentance for the forgiveness of sins. If you repent, then you can be forgiven. It is easily understood as a kind of bargain with God. We give God something – repentance – and in return God will give us forgiveness.

But in the life and teaching of Jesus we see the order constantly reversed. Jesus is constantly saying, “Your sins are forgiven, now go and sin no more.” The forgiveness comes first and we are invited to respond to it by living in the spirit of that forgiveness. God’s free gift of forgiveness enables us to repent. Which is very different from thinking that our act of repentance enables God to relent and persuades him to give up a previous desire to make us burn. “The Lord is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

Now one of the problems we have in the churches today is the continued existence of John the baptiser’s view alongside the later Jesus-shaped view. This was all over the newspapers during the recent same-sex marriage debates. We had groups like the so-called *Australian Christian Lobby* sounding a lot more like John the baptiser than Jesus as they urged the churches and politicians to withhold acceptance and blessing until people have repented and changed their ways.

Even if I agreed with them that all homosexual loving is sinful, and I don’t, I hope I would still have the integrity to conclude that a context of welcome and love and acceptance and forgiveness is the only context in which anyone finds the grace and healing to turn their lives around.

What we see in the teachings of the *Australian Christian Lobby* is the pre-Christian image of a God who is ready and waiting and perhaps even rather eager to punish the unrepentant. They portray God as an angry deity whose vengeful wrath can only be bought off by the spilling of sacrificial blood and the offering of changed lives. But in Jesus we have seen that

God is desperate to save us from the fires we have lit for ourselves and is doing everything possible to give us every opportunity to be saved by the forgiveness already freely given.

What we see in the teachings of the *Australian Christian Lobby* is a strategy that says that those who fall foul of their chosen list of “important sins” must be kept at a hostile arm’s length, excluded and marginalised and condemned until they change, and only then can the word of forgiveness be spoken.

But look at Jesus on the cross. He was speaking the words of forgiveness even as the nails were being driven into his flesh. “Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing.” There is not even a hint of holding back mercy unless payment is first offered in life-style change. In the gospel that Jesus preached and lived, it is freely given forgiveness that creates the opportunity for anyone to change.

The importance of these differences is not just something that is seen out there in the public debates about personal morality. It is crucial in how we understand and relate to ourselves and to one another right here. I know from many a pastoral conversation how many of us vacillate between these two conflicting views of God and of God’s forgiveness. Many of us still expend huge energies trying to earn God’s mercy and then, every time we fail, we quickly lose patience with ourselves and write ourselves off on behalf of God. There is rarely a week when I don’t hear at least one or two of you condemning yourselves to hell for your failures to purchase God’s forgiveness by the strength of your own endeavours to change yourselves first before asking anything of God.

And when we are not doing it to ourselves, we are often doing it to one another. I’m as guilty as any of us. That person needs to change and I’ve been waiting for them to change for what seems like a thousand years! And yet on both sides of that what is usually missing is the willingness to share in God’s saving patience, to share in God’s willingness to forgive and love and accept first, and to bask in the love and mercy and welcoming embrace, and to patiently allow it to begin the work of transformation within us.

Sometimes the things that frustrate and irritate us about ourselves or about others seem to be taking forever to change. We want results and we want them big and we want them now, and every day we are kept waiting feels like a thousand years.

But you know what? God has already forgiven us and welcomed us into the world of grace, and every day we sullenly hold back from accepting that embrace and surrendering to the power of that transforming mercy probably feels like a thousand years to God.

Jesus is not asking you to wait. The gift is given. It is for now. There is nothing you have to achieve first. And every gift of abundant mercy comes with a free set of gardening tools which can be used for sorting out your life and producing the fruits of repentance.

John the baptiser probably would have thought that sounded like getting to open your Christmas presents early. “That’s not for now, you have to wait!” he would have said. But Jesus says, “Until this gift is given and received, there can be no Christmas.”