

Today is the third Sunday in Advent and the reading from the New Testament letters is from James.

James 5:7-10

7 Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.

8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

9 Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

10 Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

I don't know all your sources of information when it comes to keeping in touch with the world. For me it's the ODT, NewsTalk ZB (minus Mike Hosking), Stuff.co.nz, the NZ Herald and the Listener. From them I've noted the following snippets of information:

- Stephen Hawking says earth has only 1000 years left and suggests a range of reasons for this
- Retired professor Guy McPherson is even more extreme – he claims that humans will cease to exist within 10 years
- The temperature at the North Pole is 22 degrees Fahrenheit higher than it normally is at this time of the year
- It was a very cool Dunedin November

I find all this interesting in the light of James' words concerning the Lord's coming, living as we do some 1900+ years since he wrote. There's not absolute clarity about James' audience and the precise situation they're in. What we do know is that the church was beyond the first flush of its growth and expansion; times were tough and there are many difficulties. Opposition was strong and organised. This was a community settling in it seemed for the long haul. And they struggled with the issue of why Jesus hasn't returned and why were they not so successful in hastening the coming of God's kingdom – sounds pretty 2016 to me.

In many ways the Christian church of 2016 continues to live under the cloud of unfulfilled expectations and unrealized hopes. I can think of the many times in my lifetime when sincere Bible students have presented their schemes about when and where Jesus will return - so far none of them have got it right.

The community or communities James wrote to were waiting for Jesus' imminent return; they expected him to come and complete his work, bringing to glorious fulfilment what had been promised.

Where was Jesus? Why hadn't he come in glory?

James counsels wait, hold on, be patient and he illustrates this in two ways.

Patience, patience, patience

7 Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. 8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

From our perspective we could add Peter's words which were in our reading on Thursday morning.

'... do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.'

2 Peter 3:8-9

15 Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him.

2 Peter 3:15

Remember this text was written to an impatient church, a church that may have been losing its faith in God because it appeared things were out of control. Imagine, if you will, that little band of early Christians, huddling together, hanging on by their fingernails in some corner of the mighty Roman Empire. They'd dared to follow Jesus and because of this they'd suffered ridicule or even worse from their pagan friends and maybe even their families

They'd been waiting and waiting; some had already died, disappointed that Jesus hadn't returned and taken control.

This letter was meant as a caring message, urging them to be patient, to have patience, to continue to wait, to believe that even though things are messy right now, they can wait with conviction that someday, one day Jesus will come and take charge.

In that sense are we any different? For some I have to say, not all by any means, they're having such a good time living the good life they don't necessarily look for Jesus to return; but for huge swathes of Christians across the world, they're in no different a space from these early Christians.

And because we've been waiting for so long, we wonder if God is in control. Part of being patient is be willing to believe and live by the truth that God acts in human history, that God is leading the course of human history to its conclusion, and therefore we must give up on our desire to control our lives and other lives.

However I sense the message of Christmas isn't necessarily that God is stepping up and controlling everything, rather that God is standing beside us, God is with us, God is more interested in loving us rather than controlling us; more interested into luring us into a loving relationship with him.

But in this process there are difficulties. Have you ever been frustrated, disappointed or impatient with God's timeline? Anybody here been hurt that Jesus is slow to deliver on his promises? Then surely you empathise with these waiting, impatient early Jesus' followers.

God's control may not be on our timeline and sometimes it seems that he doesn't seem to be very loving at all. All James says is **'be patient, stand firm'** and in our humanity and out of control lives we want to argue with God.

So James offers two illustrations to help them and us.

See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.

10 Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Learn patience from the world of agriculture; learn patience from the experience of holy men and women of God.

Example: The Christian church in Latvia suffered terribly under their communist oppression; yet the day communism lifted its grip on the country, Christian communities apparently sprang into being. Through those 70 dreadful, dark years, Christians had been secretly celebrating their faith, teaching their young, witnessing, praying – all those years.

How were you able to do that? ***'Well' a Latvian Christian replied, '50 years isn't an eternity. We had patience in our plight because we always took the long view.'***

Now this can apply to so many parts of our living – an illness doesn't quite follow the path it should, we claim a healing and it doesn't work out, an employment situation turns sour, a child or teenager doesn't conform to expected patterns of behaviour, we pray that God will work in someone's life and there seems to be no answer to our prayers.

In all these situations the word from James is wait; the word from James is be patient.

And it's hard, it's tough - it reminds me of the person who said, ***'I always believed God wanted the best for me, but in my present illness I've had to learn that God's idea of best is a lot different to mine.'*** I wonder if there's a word in that for us today.

So you've got the Lord's word to us – be patient, wait. But hidden away in this passage is another challenge:

Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

The words translated 'don't grumble' in the NIV are translated in other versions by the words, 'don't complain' or 'don't hold grudges.' At this point I should really say I'm not able to speak to you about this and sit down. But the preacher's task is to speak truth, even when it hurts him, and us.

So do you complain about other Christians, do you sit in judgement on other Christians, do you nurse grudges, do you complain or do you grumble. Notice the context here is 'one another.' It's about us here – not about people in the world around us.

Do we complain, hold grudges and grumble – I know you do because I've heard you; and I've copied you! Well not all to be sure. I really like passing the buck if I can.

Grumble, grudge, complain – they're not nice words. They're dissonant, harsh and out of harmony. They're mean words.

So how does this work out in our living. We grumble, hold grudges and complain:

- When we speak words intended for someone else to another – and we don't act biblically which is to go to the person
- when the world isn't as we think it should be, after all we're right and everyone else is wrong
- when if we'd only known one more fact we wouldn't do this
- when we judge another, when we withhold grace and when we hold on to things

And the final thing I want to say about this is that people who complain and grumble and hold grudges reveal what's in their hearts and show the Lord has plenty to do.

That's a lovely way to end a message on the 3rd Sunday in advent, the season of hope, waiting and delight. But didn't Jesus come to heal us from sins and diseases – we've just briefly explored one of those sins.

