

## About Time

### Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2023

**Readings** [2 Peter 3.8-15a](#), [Mk 1.1-8](#)

Today's readings are about clothes and clocks.

We have just heard the opening words of Mark's Gospel

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Mark's book begins at a cracking pace, and today's message from John the Baptist – prepare the way, get ready! – underlines the urgency.

We hear these words in days that have their own urgency, for some of us at least. Last week I gave you the Christmas countdown, so I should do the same today: we have just 351 hours and 13 minutes until Christmas, and the juggernaut of commercialism is now at top speed. But what's all the rush for?

John the Baptist's is a voice that cuts through the shop-till-you-drop frenzy. He is the opposite of the tipsy, Ho! Ho! Ho! of Christmas, the antidote to the grinning Santa on the back of the Coca Cola truck. I rather like the sound of him, though he does look rather odd.

With his animal skin outfit and bush tucker diet, John the Baptist looked odd even to his own people. One writer of the time [the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus] called John a 'hairy, half-naked, vegetarian desert dweller – hardly a man at all'.

Why does he look the way he does? Well, many say John is dressed as someone else (though not in a fancy dress way): he is dressed like the prophet Elijah. And when people see him, they see themselves differently.

A modern parallel. Imagine you are one of those people with cash to flash this Christmas (and many of us don't). You come out of your supermarket of choice, labouring under the weight of your festive merchandise and you see a woman.

What is she wearing? From the ground up: sandals with brown woolly socks; a rough brown tunic and possibly something brown or black on her head (a little bit like a hijab). Round her waist is a piece of rope, with three knots in it.

These are also clothes that recall someone, or actually two people, who lived long ago: St Clare and St Francis of Assisi. She is a nun, a Franciscan sister (perhaps from one of several Franciscan communities in the London area) and the three knots in the rope are a reminder of the promises she has made to live a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. And that makes you look at your bulging bags in a new light.

No doubt John the Baptist has a similar effect on the thousands who come to him for the wake-up splash of baptism in the river Jordan, but there is more to him than that. If his outfit reminds people of Elijah the prophet, they will remember that Elijah is the prophet who is supposed to return to herald the coming of Messiah, the Lord's Anointed, the One through whom God will sort the world out.

So John is a countdown figure – when people see him, they think something is coming, something big, something soon. Or rather, someone. John's words confirm it: there is one coming after me who is more powerful than I am. And that get us from clothes back to clocks.

Today we see two views of time. The urgent opening lines of Mark's gospel suggest there's hardly any time. But then we get the Second Letter of Peter, often abbreviated as '2 Peter'.

This is one of the more puzzling documents in the New Testament. It bears the name of the Apostle Peter, and some of it fits his time, but some of it seems to fit a later time, when the first generation of Christians have died.

Our reading suggests some people are uneasy because time is passing and not much is changing. It begins with the words, 'But do not ignore this one fact...' and it sounds like we have dropped into the middle of a conversation, as though the writer is making an argument and responding to an objection someone has just made.

And he is. Shortly before our reading [chapter 3 verse 4], the writer quotes people who are saying about Jesus,

Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.

In other words, wasn't Jesus supposed to have returned by now and sorted everything out? Why is God so slow?

You may look round our world and ask the same question.

And that's what's wrong with the Bible, say some. It doesn't stack up, and these two readings don't match up. Either Jesus is coming soon and it's all about to change – or he isn't and it isn't; right? But the Bible is not a railway timetable, or the TFL app telling you the bus is 7 minutes away and 2 minutes delayed.

These two readings present two takes on time, and put a question to us: which time feels like your time? Is your time more like Mark's urgent time? Or the same-old, same-old ordinary time 2 Peter?

And the same time can be different for different people. The same sixty minutes on the clock can drag or fly, too long for me, much too short for you. For someone at COP28 today, as they approach the business end of proceedings, it must seem like the clock is speeding up. For someone waiting today for news from Gaza – news of a hostage of Hamas, or of a Palestinian family – then a day will seem like an age. And of course (as we may see again this week) a week is a long time in politics.

How different the same time can be. But what is true at all times is that this time is God's time. As we hear in 2 Peter, to God,

one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

This means that God's perspective is different from ours, but also that God knows how our time perspectives can differ and change.

This moment – whether time is rushing or dragging – comes with God. And *in* this moment, God offers me whatever I need *at* this moment, whether it's the cold shower of the truth about myself, like John's baptism in the Jordan, or 2 Peter's invitation to trust in the patience of God, and so be more patient myself.

The present moment is the only time in which I can meet God, either at this time or at the end of time. And when I realise that, and for a moment stop looking over my shoulder at the past or peering into the unknowable future, when I allow myself to be present in the present, then that for me may be the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.