

SERMON FOR ADVENT 2 | 10.12.17

Half way down the railway line between Kings Cross and Cambridge is a little wayside country station called Audley End. When the great railway building era was at its height, permission had to be sought from landowners to allow the tracks to go through their fields. So it was that the owner of the massive Audley House insisted that if trains were to pass through his estate they must always stop at his station, Audley End.

In the 1960s, pre Beeching, Audley End was a country junction and passengers were often required to change trains. As a little boy of ten plus, returning to choir school at Saturday tea time, I had to wait for the connection there. Right in the middle of no-where the platforms always seemed bitterly cold and the only place to kill time was the waiting room.

Not very large, it had nothing in it but two old fashioned leather benches - and an infrared heater that required you to press the button on the wall so that it could heat up for a few minutes before turning itself off again.

Whenever I think of waiting I think of that grim, grey room. Waiting is dead time, wasted time, time when we impatiently look for the next thing to happen. We don't want to watch the ads on television but we have to wait for them to finish before the next programme. And we don't like it: we are an increasingly impatient generation.

So Advent before Christmas (and Lent before Easter) in the Church's calendar are not particularly welcome. We know that because the rest of the world has long since begun to celebrate the Christmas season. Someone told me recently that she had bought mince pies - with a sell by date for the end of November!

But hang on, says the Church, we 'need' this period of waiting: there is something of value here in a world that cannot wait for anything. And I revert to that gloomy waiting room at Audley End station and wonder what it could be?

The key reading today is the first one, from Isaiah – familiar the world over to all those who know Handel's Messiah. *Comfort, comfort my people*, sings the tenor; *speak tenderly to Jerusalem*.

But who is this addressed to, and why? Isaiah the prophet, writing eight centuries before Jesus, was preaching at the end of an absolutely catastrophic period when the whole nation had been in exile for four hundred years and had all but given up any hope of getting back home to Jerusalem.

But in the face of their despair Isaiah provides a new challenge: literally the passage reads: *Is there anyone out there who will comfort my people? Which of you has the vision to go out and offer comfort in a way that will resonate with my people – which will actually touch their hearts?*

In other words, Isaiah says, I am calling someone to spell out to these exiles more comfort than catastrophe, more hope than despair and all based on the premise that God will return and give the love that will transform the lives of all his people.

God will return. That was the lesson. That was the news that people needed to hear. But not through people just hanging around, waiting for something or someone to save them! Comfort, God says, is not about receiving – passively – his tender loving care but about the extraordinary effect within us when we suddenly grasp the truth that he will return - and are prepared to make it a key part of our lives. His comfort is not some bland sentimental 'there, there, don't worry' but a revolutionary call to reinterpret what we see around us.

As long as we think that what we have at the moment is all there is, then we stay in exile. 'Comfort' lies in hearing the possibilities that God offers, making them our own, and sharing them with others – in ways which actually relate to their ordinary lives.

Which takes 'waiting' from being something dead and useless into something proactive and vital. One voice, then another then another, first the individual, then the family, then Jerusalem then the whole world: we are no longer a bruised and broken city but a people ready to announce the coming of our God, acting as a relay team in the work of sharing the Good News.

In that way 'waiting' becomes the transformation of a beaten people into an active team. Isaiah's 'comfort' is anything but an invitation to sit on the sofa at home and wait to be cheered up!

And it is that kind of waiting that enable us to face the many situations we face on a cold and wet morning like today. It is what drives us to have confidence as we remember Nazanine Zhagari-Radcliffe locked up in Tehran, or the future settlement for the Palestinians in the face of Donald Trump's announcement about Jerusalem or the intransigence of the DUP over the retention of an open border in Ireland.

It is the kind of waiting that takes a small team of carol singers out into local pubs – not just to raise much needed cash for Pack-Up but to proclaim that Our God reigns – and is preparing to come and take us out of exile once more. Singing those familiar carols unlocked far more in people's hearts and minds than we will ever know – but, crucially, it was a way of enabling those who sang with us to hear of God's tender, forgiving love in ways they could understand. When people asked us to pray for them or for people they knew, they too were asking for the Holy Spirit the Comforter. God alone knows how that will work out – but it may never have happened unless we were there with them, singing Christmas carols.

So we wait, we watch, we pray. Not dead waiting as at Audley End station but waiting with the confidence that this world which we see is not all there is. As Luigi Gioia has written: *Neither the desert of our forgetfulness, nor the valley of our doubts, nor the mountains of our pride nor the rugged lands of our suspicion will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

So long as we remember that God's comfort is always active, always changing us, always waiting for new opportunities.