Advent 1 - The waiting game

“There is nothing divine about hurry and there is nothing hurried about the Divine.”

One of the things common to all of us here in our care home is the business of waiting. It's one of the qualities of old age. Yes, I did say quality, because quality is all about value. The worth of something. Waiting teaches us patience and that is a very special quality. It was the poet John Milton who said in his poem about blindness
"They also serve who only stand and wait." He was putting a value on waiting. The church too puts a value on waiting.

Today the church goes into waiting. It re-lives a time of preparation for the birth of Jesus. The four weeks of Advent help us to review what a hugely important event the coming of Jesus was, and is. That is why we have readings from the Old Testament as well as the New Testament.

If you were a Jew living in the Middle East say 1500 years BC, your family would be brought up to believe that a time would come when your way of life would change dramatically. It needed to change. Jews then were in a tiny minority. They were the underclass, the slaves, the undervalued members of whatever country took them in.
They seem to have been always on the move looking for better things. Like any group of people, they had gifted individuals, thinkers, poets, artists, musicians, and writers. Gradually these men and women came to the view that God was in their midst. That He was with them as they moved around. That He had a special concern for them. That He had a hand in relieving their sufferings, and that He would make a nation of them. You know the stories well enough. The stories of their struggles, and their heroes.

It was their prophets who told them that God would send them a Messiah. He would come with God's authority to bring in a time of peace and prosperity for them. They would become a nation with a place of honour in the world. So, the waiting game began, and it took nearly 2000 years before the birth of Jesus - the promised Messiah.

The reading just now was about the end of that waiting period. John the Baptist was the last of the long line of prophets who looked forward to the coming of Jesus. He was popular and noted for being a thoroughgoing Jew. People flocked to hear him. He was straight with them. “The promised one is greater than me,” he said. “He will exercise power and authority. There will be such a change as never seen before. My job is to introduce Him to you.”
So began two millennia of history of which we are a part.

If you take just a quick look at Christian belief you can see what huge changes for good have taken place because of our Lord's teaching and example.
People's lives have been changed for the better. Care for others has become important. Over the early years as Christians got together in groups, in what we now call churches, spiritual and social matters were organised. The story unfolds in the Acts of the Apostles, and Epistles of St. Paul. It's an honest story because it shows the ups and downs, and big problems.

That's how the story continued in the church of the Middle Ages. It's the story too of how the church works today.

In our lifetimes, we have seen many ups and downs. Methodists and Anglicans are still trying to get back together. The Free churches and Congregationalists joined up to make the United Reformed Church. Rome and Canterbury have been trying to grow back together. They have at least been talking to each other for the last 25 years. We have seen in our country the advent of the so-called black Churches, which attract thousands of immigrants from Africa, India, and elsewhere. Changes are happening everywhere.

More than anything we have seen churches world-wide trying to share the Christian story as people change. That is quite something!

But it has taken a long, long time.  The waiting game is no new thing. We are still waiting for the advent of Jesus over 2000 years ago to work its way through. We have been, and we still are, a waiting church. Probably we are a rapidly changing church too, and no-one can say what it will look like in ten or twenty years’ time. I'm pretty certain it will be a very different looking church from the one we have today

Re-living this is good for us. It draws out that quality of patience which marks Christian Faith. We have to bide God's time. There is nothing divine about hurry and there is nothing hurried about the Divine. God's time isn't our time. We work in decades and centuries. God works, it seems, in millennia, if you accept that this world is some 13 billion years old. He is unhurried and patient. That's a lesson today's people have to learn.

And all of us, in today's uncertain world, must hold fast the truth that church and faith belong to God. He has them firmly in hand. We are a waiting church. We are, like those Jews before Jesus came, a waiting people.  But we must try to be a patient people too, as the coming of Jesus works itself through time now, and in time to come.