

ARE WE THERE YET? Isaiah 64:1-9

Introduction

“Are we there yet?” I’m sure every car-driving parent is familiar with this oft-repeated question first asked 5 minutes into a several-hour-long journey from the back seat! It was immortalized by the character “Donkey” in the animation “Shrek”, given its unmistakable voice by Eddie Murphy. Yet how this question echoes in our adult hearts and hopes! “Are we there yet?” – we’ve got a vaccine at last! “Are we there yet?” – able to emerge from our lockdown lives? And like the weary parent, the response comes, “No, not yet!” The cavalry is beginning to appear over the hill, but it has by no means arrived to rescue us. Oh yes, we’ll get a little taste of it for a few days over Christmas when we’ll be allowed out to play with each other in our household bubbles. But how we long for unlimited freedom to move about, to hug and kiss our loved ones, to be with each other without fear of passing on the dreaded virus! “Are we there yet?”

In Church Life

How we echo this longing question in our church life, too! How we long for things we realise we’ve taken for granted: singing hymns and carols; taking bread and wine; friendly and unmasked company; being in and around our beloved buildings; even holding meetings *in the flesh!* No, we’re not there yet – but we look forward earnestly to that day.

Rend the Heavens!

William Cooper’s hymn about the presence of the Lord in gathered worship starts off “*Jesus where’er thy people meet/there they behold thy mercy seat*”. It rises to a climax in the final verse: *Lord, we are few, but Thou art near/nor short thine arm, nor deaf thine ear/ O rend the heav’ns, come quickly down/and make a thousand hearts thine own!* It’s based on the words from Isaiah “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” The prophet expresses a longing for God to act in a decisive and unmistakable way. Can’t you sort something out, God? He seems to demand. Couldn’t you repeat what we know you did at Sinai with Moses and the children of Israel? The holy mountain burned and quaked! Moses knew he’d met you and received the ten commandments direct from you! Our attempts to live aright are like filthy worn out rags. No one seems bothered by you any longer – and no wonder – you don’t seem to be obvious anymore!

Why are we not there yet?! laments Isaiah to the God who’d sent him to speak to a close minded nation of people.

Coming in the Clouds

Mark’s gospel points to something decisive that will happen. It sounds dramatic and unmistakable. It sounds like an answer to Isaiah’s longing for the heavens to be torn open. Sun darkened; moon failing to shine; stars falling from the sky; powers of heaven shaken. And all an overture to the “Son of Man coming on the clouds”. “Are we there yet?” Well, not yet, but when we see these things happening, Jesus says, you’ll not be far off from the great arrival. But are these descriptions to be taken literally? Lucy Winkett, Rector of St James, Piccadilly, remarks that Jesus was trying to communicate the urgency of his message to the people that they should live in a different way. He used over the top language – literally apocalyptic imagery. And yet, muses Rev Winkett, she has often been more moved by singing an advent hymn such as “Lo, he comes with clouds descending” than the words describing end of the world type scenes. The heaven-rending language can be a distraction from what it might be really like. Waiting for the dramatic to happen distracts us from getting on with the ordinary in the every day.

Subtle Signs and Sensitive Molding

Along with Paul writing to the Corinthians about “last things”, Isaiah and Mark also describe the subtle signs and the sensitive molding that goes on all the time. They urge us simply to wait. But to wait patiently and to wait watchfully. Supernovae might explode elsewhere in the universe, but here on planet earth buds form quietly bringing the promise of spring; roots develop underground in winter, unseen by us. Preparations are under way even as we repeatedly ask “Are we there yet?” Feel the subtle molding of the potter’s hands on your life – says Isaiah. Watch for the signs that are there, says Jesus. Wait expectantly – don’t give up hope or think that the master will never re-appear. Act now in ways that demonstrate your hope. He’ll want to know you’ve been taking care of things properly in his absence. God’s time is not our time. Like the vaccine, the things that will really save us take time to develop; a properly and carefully prepared remedy cannot be rushed. Be faithful in what you can do here and now: prayer, reading the Bible, doing what you can to make a difference in peoples’ suffering lives; trust God to be at work in the ordinary.

The Meaning is in the Waiting

Some of you will know that I enjoy pilgrimage. I often say that the going is more significant to me than the arriving. I relish the daily walking, being in nature, meeting other pilgrims. Yes, we have a destination and one day we arrive in Santiago (or wherever). But the going means as much as the destination. In a similar way, the meaning is in the waiting. Paul Gooder wrote an Advent devotional book with that title. It is taken from a poem by R.S. Thomas which my colleague David Lewis reminded me of the other day. So, I’d like to conclude by allowing the poetry to speak and to wish you all a fruitful season of Advent waiting:

Kneeling

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the suns light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.
Prompt me God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

First published in Thomas, R. S. (1968). *Not that He Brought Flowers*. United Kingdom: Hart-Davis.