

3rd Sunday of Advent

James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11

St James, Shirley & St Johns, Tidbury Green 14 December 2025

Sermon: Waiting with doubt, patience and joy

Waiting

One of the great Advent themes, is of course, that of ‘waiting’. Throughout much of the Church’s Advent liturgy, waiting is explicitly mentioned or implicitly woven in. Waiting underpins the two key messages of Advent – that of the future final coming of Christ at the end of time to bring judgment and healing upon the Creation – that time when heaven and earth shall be joined together. And of course, the waiting for Christmas – the time of the incarnation – God coming to us as Jesus, and the invitation that Christmas offers us to reflect afresh on what that means for us, for the Church and for our society. Our Advent calendars and candle wreathes, two expressions of waiting, counting down and looking forward.

And waiting is also, of course much prevalent in other ways. Whether that’s excited children waiting for presents to be revealed on Christmas Day; exhausted adults waiting for a rest from work; nations and peoples waiting for an end to war, and relief from hunger; and many more expressions very personal to us.

Now we know that Christmas Day is guaranteed to come – no-one ones to go back to the days of Cromwell when Christmas Day was banned! Although after hearing Noddy Holder for the umpteenth time on the radio – I could rethink that!

But for the time we spend waiting for the other things, waiting too long can naturally create in us a sense of doubt – will what we are waiting for ever actually happen?

And that’s where today’s readings come in.

Doubt

Doubt is a natural human reaction to when things we expect to happen, don’t; all when the polar opposite occurs. And if it can

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happen to the likes of John the Baptist, one of the great heroes of our faith, we shouldn't feel guilty if it happens to us.

The Matthew reading tells us that John was in prison. We know that Herod's troops took him into prison because he was critical of Herod marrying his brother's wife. And John was suffering, no doubt. He had of course prophesied about Jesus being the saviour, Messiah, the son of God - Jesus had paid John the highest honour of allowing him to baptise him and, as it says in the passage John was more than a prophet, one of the greatest people ever to be born.

So perhaps John was thinking along the lines of 'why has Jesus not got me out of here?' If he truly is the person I thought him to be. I think we can all resonate with that when we think about our own suffering and the suffering of the world. If Jesus really is king, really is in charge, if his Holy Spirit is really amongst us, then why is the world as it is, why do we suffer, and therefore will our waiting ever actually result in his return, judgement and sorting it all out.

The communities that made-up the early church we're all primed to expect Jesus return soon. The epistle of James, probably the older brother of Jesus, was written to encourage the Jesus followers scattered around the regions in their struggles.

Many of them were poor, struggling to make ends meet while the wealthy withheld wages or used the courts to their own advantage. In society, the rich were shown honour while the poor were pushed aside, and faced ridicule and exclusion. On top of that, there were the inner battles—envy, quarrels, temptations—that threatened to fracture their communities from within. James calls these “trials of many kinds”.

The exhortation that James gives us, both to his early communities' and to those of us who wait with the modern equivalence of those problems that I just mentioned, is *to be patient*. Another theme of

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Advent, and something that many of us, definitely me, finds a challenge

Patience

We often hear the old saying, “Patience is a virtue.” It’s a phrase that has come down through the centuries—from Roman wisdom, through medieval poets like Chaucer, into our everyday speech—because it has a deep meaning. Patience has a strength that steadies us when life feels unfair, when trials press in, or when answers seem delayed. James reminds his scattered flock that perseverance in hardship leads to maturity and wholeness, and Paul lists patience among the fruit of the Spirit—the evidence of God’s life at work in us. To be patient is to trust that God is present in the waiting, helping us to deal healthily with doubt.

Jesus gives us wisdom on how to nurture patience in what he tells the disciples to tell John. He doesn't answer with a straight yes but points to the good things that are happening as evidence.

Patience is nurtured when we learn to give thanks. When we pause to acknowledge the good things God is already doing among us—the kindness of a friend, the beauty of creation, the small victories of daily life, our mindset changes from what hasn’t happened to what we have. Gratitude reminds us that God is faithful in the present, and that God’s timing can be trusted for the future. In this way, thanksgiving becomes the soil in which patience takes root. This helps us to find strength to wait with hope and to feel a sense of what is another Advent theme: *joy*.

Joy

The third Sunday of Advent is known as Gaudete Sunday – the Sunday of joy. When Advent was a six-week period with more focus on the penitential aspect (like Lent) this was a Sunday of relaxing the discipline. But joy is an important part of the Christian life and accompanies us in our waiting.

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Unlike simple happiness, joy is not dependent on circumstances; it is not fleeting but permanent; not shallow but deep; it is joy that holds us steady when life is uncertain, lifts us up when we feel weary, and gives us hope when everything feels hopeless.

Christian joy is an assurance that is built on our believing that God came among us as Jesus, lives with us now through the Holy Spirit, and will come again. It informs our minds and guides our responses to everything that life throws our way.

Joy also needs nurturing and tending to, done through our prayer life, our reading of Scripture and our coming together as a community.

Future

As individuals and as a church, we are waiting for many things: healing in our lives, reconciliation in our communities, peace and justice in our world, and for the fulfilment of God's promises. At times we may doubt whether these things will ever come, just as John the Baptist did from his prison cell. Yet Advent reminds us that waiting is not empty but filled with patience that steadies us, and joy that lifts us. Patience teaches us to trust God's timing, and joy assures us that Christ has come, is with us now, and will come again.

So, let's wait *not* in despair, but in hope, and live as a patient, joyful people who shine as the light of Christ's presence in the world this Advent, Christmas and beyond. Amen

Rev'd Richard Haynes 3rd Sunday of Advent 14 December 2025