

James 5:7-10

7 Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.

8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

9 Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

10 Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Matthew 11:2-11

2 When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples

3 to ask him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'

4 Jesus replied, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see:

5 the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

6 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.'

7 As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind?

8 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces.

9 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

10 This is the one about whom it is written: "'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'"

11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Waiting well with joy James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

We changed our themes a bit so although the reading is majoring on John the Baptist, we're talking about waiting.

Waiting well. With Joy.

I've always been reminded that the gospel is good news, and I wouldn't be up here if I didn't believe that passionately.

We have good news to share. Hope, peace, love and joy.

Good news of great joy. And we can now focus a bit more on Christmas and less on who should govern us.

Whatever else happens, the return of Christ, as James tells us, is as inevitable as the coming of the seasons. There's clearly trouble amongst the believers James is writing to, because he warns them that although they may be judging others, they too will be judged.

So we have to be patient. God will keep his promises but in his own time and not ours. Besides if he'd come as quickly as they thought he would, none of us would be here to enjoy His promises!

There's an addiction to getting everything *now*, immediately, which has got progressively worse, firstly with the introduction of easy credit, and now with online next or even same day delivery. We can't bear to wait for anything. I'm just as guilty as anyone on this. But again and again in the bible accounts, God has a different timeframe, and I would say always a better timeframe.

We have to learn to wait.

There's a time for everything, as the writer of Ecclesiastes says, but there is also a right and a wrong time for things to happen. The birth of Jesus came at the ideal time in history, when, due to the Roman Empire and the geography of the Mediterranean, the movement he started was able to spread very quickly throughout the known world. His return will also come at the right time in history, we just don't know when. Anticipation is often the best part of waiting for something, but the final time it will be different, literally infinitely better.

Although the birth of the Messiah was widely prophesied, the timing was unknown, at least to most people. But John the Baptist's father Zechariah, who was an old man, had a vision of an angel who told him he would have a child despite his old age and that of his wife Elizabeth.

He was sceptical to say the least. Dumbstruck. Literally. He didn't speak again until he saw the child and named him John. Elizabeth's relative Mary was even more astonished at God's timing. Her pregnancy happened before she had even had a chance to wait!

And it has to be said, something I hadn't noticed before, John himself when it comes to it, isn't really sure whether Jesus is the real deal: *When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'*

This is really quite funny, bearing in mind John's knowledge of the family history to this point. Not to mention that he seemed very sure who Jesus was when he baptised him! I think he had some of his father's scepticism. And there were it has to be said many false prophets around. Monty Python's *Life of Brian* is based on that very fact, that at that time it was easy to be taken in by the latest pretender to the role of Messiah.

The message comes back from Jesus, but not "yes I am the Messiah", because he didn't want to be killed as John was shortly after this. At least not at that point anyway.

Here's where we find the joy in this account

'Go back and report to John what you hear and see:

the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

These are the signs that God's kingdom has arrived and they echo Isaiah's messianic prophecies. Jesus only ever demonstrates God's justice and mercy and love. The prophecies are fulfilled not by any claims and promises but by what actually happens. This is still the case today. The only reason we don't see more of this, as Jesus himself said, is our lack of faith.

He couldn't do any miracles [in Nazareth], except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.

The question we have to ask ourselves is what do we expect?

When we go to church, what do we expect?

When we decide to follow Jesus, what do we expect?

Maybe just that as long as we show up in church occasionally we will feel better. That we're part of something vaguely benevolent.

The trouble is that I don't get that at all from looking at the life of Jesus. He gave away everything he had, including his very life, for the sake of others. He always had time for those who were sick or emotionally troubled, but not for the outwardly religious who did nothing but tell people how they should behave.

Do we expect to suffer for our faith? It was pretty much standard in the first century church

We all have to make up our minds how we respond to him.

So here's the final part of his message for John:

Blessed is anyone who does not stumble because of me.

Or a modern version which I found much clearer

God bless you if you're not upset by what I'm doing.

A lot of people were very upset by what Jesus was doing. They wanted a political leader to get rid of the Romans. Instead he was hanging around with undesirable people. Sinners.

Then he talks to the crowd about what they expected when they went to see John. *'What did you go out into the wilderness to see?*

A reed swayed by the wind? A man dressed in fine clothes?

11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women there's no one greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is.

John had come to declare the end of the waiting. That's all.

He was a great prophet, maybe the greatest, but he declared an end to the old way of doing things. The Old Covenant had expired. With Jesus, the kingdom of God had arrived, and the proof was in what Jesus was doing.

Unconditional love, compassion, passion for justice, healing the sick, freeing prisoners of addiction, concern for the poor.

A sacrificial life, which gives life and joy to others.

This is not to be found in the promises of politicians.

Or presidents, or powerful people, or in many religious leaders.

Jesus was not a religious leader.

Jesus was God incarnate, Emmanuel, God with us.

He was the full revelation and explanation of God, and so the explanation of the purpose of existence is found in the person of Jesus.

The blind will see, and the deaf will hear.

This is more than physical healing.

Only God can open our eyes and ears to the truth of who Jesus is, and when he does the joy of Christmas becomes a reality.

Amen.