

Are we there yet?

We used to live at Hornsby, and we used to often go to my Mum and Dad's house at Wahroonga for Christmas lunch. After lunch, we'd drive the ten minutes or so back home – and that trip would take us through Pearce's Corner – we'd see the cars queued up along the Pacific Highway waiting at the lights to turn on to the freeway and head off on their north coast holiday trip. Most of them would have had several hours ahead of them yet. The families would be tired from a big day... tempers would be frayed, no doubt. And at some point, I'm sure every child in each one of those cars would have asked the question that every child asks -

"Are we there yet?"

We can joke about it. We can be frustrated by it. We can charge each child one French fry each time they say it from their next visit to McDonalds (or one chicken nugget, if you're feeling mean). We can even be angered by it. But in the end, it's a question I think we all ask.

"Are we there yet?"

Because whether we acknowledge it or not, we are all wanting something more than we have. We are wanting to get there, or get something. We are wanting to get through our current circumstances and on to something better. Sometimes it's little things, sometimes it's big things.

We're wanting our congregation here to grow – not only in numbers but in our knowledge and love of God. To grow in width and depth, as our presbytery minister Martin puts it.

We're wanting to get through our health problems – and for others to get through theirs.

We're wanting to get through our financial problems.

So often, people are 'just wanting to get through...' whatever it might be. Get through the next week. Get through this semester. Get through this problem that I have. Get through Christmas.

And 'just wanting to get through...' is really the grown-up version of asking "are we there yet?"

It's been the same throughout history. In ancient times, the people of Israel knew the promises of God. They knew the promises that God had made to Abraham and later to Moses and David – that God would save them. They just wanted to get through their current circumstances, through the wilderness, through exile and so on – they wanted to get to the time when God would send them the messiah – the saviour. "Are we there yet?" they effectively would ask God.

Of course, they were asking that because they knew that God would send a messiah. They were certain of it. The promises had been made, and so their concern was not if but when.

Time had passed. A long time. And nothing had happened. Years became decades. Decades became centuries. It is no surprise that we find the Psalmist asking, as I asked in the prayers of the people last week, "How long, O Lord? How long must we wait?"

It's the same for Christians today. As I shared last week, we know the promises that Jesus will return. We think about them particularly during advent.

The word 'advent' means 'coming' – in the sense of 'arrival' or 'beginning' or 'start', and it's the time of the church year when we should be focusing on – and looking forward to – the Second Coming of Jesus, when all that he came to earth to accomplish when he was born as a baby in Bethlehem, will be fulfilled, will be completed.

Again, from last week, we don't know when the day of our Lord Jesus Christ will be, but we know that it will come, and we know it gets closer every day. Indeed, we are one day closer to the day when Jesus will return to put all things right than we were yesterday.

But even as we read the New Testament we see that waiting for Jesus' return was causing Christians no little anxiety, and it was to address this anxiety that the Apostle Peter wrote the words in today's reading. In verse 4 of chapter three of his second letter, just a few verses before today's reading, Peter writes "They will say 'Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation".

Doubts about Jesus' return were alive and well during the lifetime of the apostles themselves. But, here we are, two thousand odd years on, and still Jesus hasn't returned.

In response to those concerns, those worries, Peter explains that, God's view of time is very different than ours. He quotes Psalm 90 to make his point. "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day."

If God says he's going to do something soon, we mustn't hold him to our standards of time. And, for that matter, our own standards of time show us the same thing.

One thing that is consistently reported by older people is how fast time flies. I know when I was a child, it took forever to get from one Christmas to the next, but now they seem to come at me pretty fast. Sometimes it's explained that that is because each year is a smaller and smaller fraction of your life as you age.

But what do you think time looks like to someone who is eternal? We can't know, because the very concept of eternity doesn't fit into our standards of counting. That's why Peter says, "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day."

We sort of get that, but even so, we find ourselves asking "Are we there yet?" If we can just 'get through' this age, then things will be okay.

But it remains a great question – and it's one we should think about. Why aren't we there yet? Peter explains the reason for the apparent delay in verse 9. "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

Peter tells us that God is patient with people – with us. We know that God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not die but have eternal life... but it's people's choice – our choice – to believe in him, to respond to the love God has shown for us. God is patiently giving all people the chance to respond.

Peter says that it is not God's will that any should perish – God wants all to repent; to turn away from the ways of the world, and turn to God.

Peter is effectively saying that Jesus has waited 2,000 odd years to return, so that we here today will not perish, but come to repentance. And not only us, but those who have gone before us. And not only them, but those that may come after us.

We, as followers of Christ, know that something exciting is coming... but we don't know when, so we can't count down to it – instead, we need to look forward to it.

##

Peter tells us “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.”

It will come suddenly, but not unexpectedly.

And so, as we look forward to it, we need to prepare for it. Verse 11 and 12 tell us that “Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.”

How should we prepare? Easy! Live holy and godly lives. Live as God wants us to live. Live as Jesus showed us how to live. Feed the hungry, raise up the poor, comfort the sick, free the oppressed and share the good news of Jesus with the world. As the prophet Micah tells us - act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God. (Micah 6:8). Or as Jesus tells us – Love God with all your heart, soul mind and strength – and love your neighbour as yourself.

As I said: Easy. But perhaps easier in theory than in practice, because the things of this world and our lives get in the way.

Peter, though, doesn't simply tell us to live holy and godly lives – we need to look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. He tells us that “That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.” (3:12-13)

There is destruction, but there is also creation. And if you think about it, you'll realise that there needs to be destruction, because all the bad stuff needs to be dealt with.

It's as John tells us in the book of Revelation (21:1-4) Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

The old order of things will have passed away.

I've presided at many funerals this year – as many this year, as I had in the previous six years. Too many, it feels – but at each one that last verse, Revelation 21:4, really touches my heart, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away”. All that is wrong with the world is summed up in death, but we have God's promise that death will be no more.

During Advent season, we particularly remember how the prophecies of the Old Testament of the coming of Israel's messiah were fulfilled. And we can – we should – look forward to the ultimate fulfilment of what God has promised. Let us put away our doubts and anxieties, and try not to say “Are we there yet?” too often.

Our reading to today ends with Peter (3:14-15) telling us “So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him.”

As followers of Jesus, we know the story of his birth, his life, his teaching, his death on the cross for us, and his rising and ascension to open the way to eternal life. God's patience with the world means that we have the chance to share that good news with the world.

Are we there yet?

Not quite.

As I said last week we shouldn't be living as if this world will last forever. And we shouldn't be living doing whatever we want for ourselves, without regard for God and without regard for other people.

And we do that, by living as the people of God. Living as God wants us to live. Being found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Trusting in God, trusting in the salvation Jesus has won for us by his death on the cross.

In recent times we've had Christmas seasons touched by Covid, by bushfires, by the shadow of conflict across the world. This Christmas season, we're experiencing a cost-of-living crisis and a housing crisis, and we're living with a conflict in Israel and Gaza, which is causing divisions even in our society.

We know that God has a plan to put all things right. We know that the arrival of that baby in humble circumstances two thousand years ago, was the beginning of the fulfilment of that plan. We know that in his death on the cross, Jesus has paid the price for the sins of this world. We know that God is patient with his creation. But we also know that God has a plan to bring all things to him. Let's look forward – not simply counting to a day's celebration, but looking forward to a bright and everlasting future – to the future that God has promised – and Jesus has made possible - to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. And where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

So let's not say "Are we there yet?"

Let's be patient.

And instead, let's just say "Hallelujah! Come, Lord Jesus."

Amen.