

Good morning everyone, my name is Liz, I'm currently at theological college training to be a priest and I go to Holy Trinity Attleborough in Nuneaton. I've been a member of the Mother's Union for about a year now. I was really honoured to be asked to preach today for two reasons. Firstly, although I've only been a member of the MU for a year, my Grandma, who passed away during Covid was a long-time supporter of the MU and she would regularly tell me with great joy about meetings, and raffles, and knitting Easter chicks, and attending services. She would also, quite honestly and brutally tell me how good, or not good the speaker was. So, my hope is that if she'd have been here today she'd have been telling me that it was a lovely service and a great preach today – because if it's not she wouldn't have held her punches!

And secondly, I love this Advent season in the churches' calendar and enjoy any opportunity to talk about and reflect on it. So I've set my stakes quite high – make my Grandma proud, and don't fudge a talk about one of my favourite seasons in the church calendar ... no pressure then!

I wonder, how many of the towns, villages, or cities where you live have already had their Christmas light switch on? How many of us have already completed our Christmas shopping? How many of us have already had a mince pie? None of these are bad things in themselves – in fact if you've already completed your Christmas shopping, I salute you! But they are part of the culture we live in, which demands Christmas NOW. This is a symptom of our culture that is losing the ability to wait, and in particular to wait well. Why should we have to *wait* to listen to Christmas music? Why should we have to *wait* to put our Christmas decorations up? In secular society, Christmas Day isn't the first day of a period of joy and celebration after a time of quiet reflection, empty days, and prayerful waiting. It is the climax of a time of weeks long noise, colour, and celebration. Waiting has been pushed out, and has been replaced with distraction - in the form of music, decorations and lights.

Is that a bad thing? In some ways it sounds like I'm arguing for us to return to Victorian way of living – dour faces, no fun allowed, children shall be seen and not heard (now I have a two year old I can see the benefits of that one!) That's not what I'm arguing for – I love Christmas as much as the next 4 year old. But am I arguing

for the benefit of having a time of prayerful, reflective, God-filled waiting. This mirrors the time before the first Christmas and helps us to re-engage in a different, deeper way with all the characters we meet across advent and at Christmas – Mary and Joseph, waiting for the arrival of a Son and a King, Elizabeth waiting for the arrival of her son, and for her husband to be able to speak again, the prophets of old who were waiting for a Messiah to come, a promise to be fulfilled. All waiting, with anticipation, hope, joy, and peace.

We too are waiting. We live in the joy and light in the knowledge that Jesus Christ, God the Son became human, was born, lived on the Earth, demonstrated living the perfect life, took our sins when he died on the cross, was resurrected and broke the power of death, has ascended to heaven and intercedes for us. As Christians we live everyday with as redeemed people, living with the truth and joy that being disciples of Christ brings. And yet, and yet. We are waiting. We are waiting for a time when the world is wholly redeemed. We are waiting for a time when our frail bodies and minds are wholly redeemed and healed. And in this waiting, we can experience heartbreak, and fear and grief. In this waiting, we can experience frustration, injustice, and hurt. In this waiting, we can experience losing our way, forgetting who we are, questioning everything we were once sure of.

We live in a broken world, in finite bodies. Regardless of what tech companies want to sell us and what our culture wants us to believe. Waiting is inevitable. Early light switch-ons, speedy WiFi connections, Christmas music in shops in November, allowing the grandkids to have their presents early, doesn't help us when we are waiting for test results at the hospital, or waiting for that thick line on a pregnancy test. It won't help us to wait well by the side of our dying loved one's bedside, or cope with the life-long wait of caring for a child with disabilities. But Advent could. Because in advent we are challenging ourselves to wait well. To allow ourselves to stop. To become aware of the discomfort of the realities of the world around us. To sit with the difficulties we have. Most importantly though in Advent we are not doing this alone, and we are not doing this with the aim of becoming bogged down, dwelling

and wallowing. No, in advent we are learning to share these things with God, and wait with God, and wait on God.

Waiting with God means prayerfully inviting God to sit alongside us in this time of reflection before Christmas. Trusting that when we do so, we are inviting our Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace, and our Comforter to sit with us. Deeper still, we can invite Him to minister to us in our waiting, trusting that He has the power to heal, to comfort and to guide. We just heard the **Hope-filled** message given to Jeremiah as he waited on and listened to God, in which God promises his plans for his people are ultimately good, despite the coming hardships. We also heard the eternal promise given by Jesus of his abundant **peace** that he leaves us, which he invites us to receive and rest in... Mary responds with such **joy** at the news that the Messiah is coming, and she has been blessed to carry him and call him her son. To have responded in this way to, quite frankly startling news, could have only been as a result of knowing the scriptures, already waiting for the coming Messiah and understanding what this would mean for the world... And what this means is made abundantly clear in John 3:16 – God's **love** for the world means that *whoever* believes in him shall have eternal life. In advent, when we take time in the quiet to reflect, pray, read the bible, and spend time with God our experience of His hope, peace, joy and love will deepen, and it is this that will help sustain us and enable us to wait well in the other times of waiting we face in our life.

Often when we think of waiting we think of sitting and doing nothing, waiting for something that is out of our control, and waiting can sometimes leave us feeling powerless. But we may well find that when we wait with God and on God like I've just described, that he calls us to *do* something. I think it's brilliant that our 16 days of Activism in the Mother's Union coincides with the start of Advent. When I was planning this talk I was reflecting on the similarities of waiting and Activism. They aren't necessarily two words that we would naturally put together, in fact on the surface they may seem totally opposite. Waiting – often conjures images of holding back, Activism – often conjures images of pushing forwards, making change. But I do think they have some core similarities. Waiting and Activism are two activities borne

out of us living in a world that is broken, they can both at times feel frustrating, both potentially feel hopeless given the size of the challenge, and both are most fruitful when God is at the core and guiding each. I would argue that waiting and activism are two sides of the same coin. When we wait well – that is we wait with, and we wait on God he is likely to move, change and break our hearts for what breaks His, that is very often the starting place for activism.

During this 16 days of activism our diocese will be joining the Mother's Union nationally and internationally in calling an end to gender based violence and Domestic Abuse. There are numerous resources available to get involved during this time. There is a very moving "Souls of our shoes" exhibition with quotes from people who have experienced domestic violence, on display in the Cathedral. In churches a chair may be covered with red material and information on the "No More 1 in 3" movement and the new MU Rise Up campaign to raise awareness of Domestic Abuse. The letters of Rise Up stand for - Respond, Inform, Support, Empower, Unite and Pray... There are poems, prayer resources, and many more ideas available. Activism has always been at the heart of the MU as a means of bringing God's love and his kingdom into the communities around us. As part of the MU we are each being called to bring God's love and his Kingdom to the communities we are part of.

So this advent will we respond to the call to practice waiting well - waiting in hope, peace, joy and love for the coming of our King – waiting with God and on God? Recognising that when we respond to this call to learn to wait well, and enter into it wholly we are likely to be changed from the inside out, and we are likely to find ourselves feeling called to activism in some form or another, to bring God's kingdom here, to the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.