

Sunday 11 December 2022
St. Margaret's & Holy Trinity – Holy Communion
Advent 3

Isaiah 35:1-10
James 5:7-1
Matthew 11:2-11

In last Sunday's Gospel reading, we found John the Baptist arriving to herald the beginning of Jesus' adult ministry.

John was incredibly rude to the people who flocked to hear him preach about their judgement and their downfall and, yet, somehow they seemed to love it. But by the time we get to this morning's Gospel passage, those very same people seem to have tired of John and the uncomfortable truths he tells.

John is now in prison. King Herod had taken exception to his fiery preaching and particularly to his denunciation of Herod for marrying his brother's ex-wife. This was all part of John's announcement that God's kingdom, and God's true king, were on the way. Herod wasn't the real king; God would replace him. No wonder Herod put him in prison.

But now in prison, John was disappointed and he sends some of his few remaining faithful followers to Jesus. Is he going to ask the new favourite of the people to use his influence with the people to free him? Is he going to remind Jesus just how much he owes to John; after all, John was the first to recognise him and gave him a helping hand up the ladder?

Well actually, not at all.

What John wants to know is whether it is safe for him to give up and hand his mission on; to hand over the baton to Jesus.

John has never been under any illusion about what he is. The centre of the stage is not for him. But equally, he doesn't undervalue what it is he has been called to do. He knows he is the one who is to broadcast news of the coming of God's Messiah, and he just can't relax until he knows whether or not he has done his job. So, he sends to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to with for another?"

So when John's disciples carry Jesus' answer back to him, did he hear it as a yes, or a no? What Jesus says couldn't be more different from the message that John preached. John shouted for repentance in the face of the wrath of God: he spoke often of an axe cutting down the dead trees, and then there was the unquenchable fire which John said was waiting for the unrepentant.

Jesus, on the other hand, speaks of mercy, healing and rejoicing.

I wonder, did John recognise the connection? Did he see that the mercy Jesus is offering is as much a judgement on the world as the terrible fire that John himself had forecast? Did he see it as God's forceful overturning of the complacency of those John described as a 'brood of vipers'?

Perhaps he did.

After all, John comes across as a man of very little personal vanity and a huge commitment to God's kingdom, so I really do think that he was more than able to let go of his own interpretation and just rejoice in God's new work in Christ.

Matthew specifically tells us that John's disciples have already left to carry their odd message back to John by the time Jesus pays his amazing tribute to John. And it was indeed a very fulsome tribute. Jesus said to the gathered people... "I tell you the truth, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist".

But John didn't get to hear that. All the reassurance he is to get is that cryptic message which he is left to interpret in terms of what he knows himself about God. You see, Jesus' witness to John and his message is not for John, to boost his ego. No, it is for the crowds who once followed John but then transferred their allegiance to Jesus and who will soon be looking for the next, much more acceptable, much more palatable kid on the block.

That tribute that Jesus paid to John was warm, perceptive and yet, puzzling. He very firmly identifies John with the fulfilment of prophecy, and he says he is the greatest man ever born. And yet, he is still outside. He is the messenger, not the message. He has to stand behind and point forward.

All of us, who lack John's courage, who lack John's love of God and his calling, are on the inside and we are able to be on the inside partly because John was prepared to play that role and no other. But Jesus' message to John is not just a take-it-or-leave-it summary of Jesus' own ministry. It is a message given in a code that Jesus is sure John will be able to understand. Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 35, the same passage that we heard earlier this morning and John would have known this. The wilderness, we are told, where John made his home, is to break out into flower and the fearful are to be comforted. John is in prison, awaiting certain death; how can he not be afraid? John preached the judgement and vengeance of God, and here in Isaiah we discover that the wrath of God is an instrument of salvation for the weak and the fearful. So, we can see that even John the Baptist had doubts about whether Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

Sometimes, what we see of Jesus' redeeming presence and love at work doesn't fit our own expectations of what it means to be Christ. John longed to see the Messiah, but was fearful of misunderstanding what he'd heard. The disciples later also struggled to grasp that the Messiah would be servant of all and go so far as to submit to death, rather than be a powerful ruler in a

royal palace. Others seemed to understand only too well, but were sufficiently perverse to insist on rejecting the Lordship of Christ, however he arrived.

John the Baptist helped prepare the way for the coming of the Kingdom, although he would not live to see the remarkable events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. We are privileged to be able to look back and see, from a different vantage point, all that God has done to demonstrate his love for us.

It is not enough simply to see, however; the key question is this: How will we respond to God's call?

Christ's kingdom comes in subtle and subversive shapes, and I will freely admit I often find my assumptions about Jesus are too small, or off beam. Perhaps it is the same for all of us.

Then the choice is this: will we perversely sit with an expectation that suits our own personal priorities, or will we be ready to have heart, mind and soul changed with a fuller understanding of Christ the King and his kingdom and all that that means for those around us?

Amen.