

Are we to wait for another?

St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

Third Sunday of Advent, Year A. 14th December 2025

Isaiah 35:1-10, Song of Mary, James 5.1-10, Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' (Matthew 11.2)

When Revd Sue outlined the themes for this Advent, I was sure I'd drawn the long straw by getting the third rose coloured Sunday. From the poke to 'Awake' in week one, then John the Baptist's wild call to repent and 'Prepare' by way of a radical slash and burn in week two, we come to the third Sunday which Sue titled, with reference to the Isaiah reading, 'Rejoice, even fools shall not lose their way.' Brilliant! I thought – I should have something to say about that! But of course there is more to it than a simple faith that all shall be well.

So, before we explore this theme of rejoicing, we have to contend with the awful account of John the Baptist in prison. He has been locked up for rebuking the governor Herod Antipas for his unfaithfulness to his wife and brother and other wrong doings, but also no doubt for his widespread influence and agitation among the people. His prophetic voice has landed him in deep trouble.

In this dark place we find him questioning the whole trajectory of his life and doubting whether Jesus is indeed the long-awaited Messiah that he so passionately proclaimed. We cannot know John's mind – he has heard of Jesus' healing works – yet seems to have expected more and wonders if he is "the one." There is despondency and deep sadness here. Even in their mother's wombs John and Jesus had leapt in recognition of one another (Luke 1.4-45) and John is the called the patron saint of spiritual joy because of this. John himself baptised Jesus – who he seemed to know and recognise for he was humbly reluctant to do so – thinking it more appropriate that Jesus baptise him. And John was there when Jesus rose from the waters of the river Jordan and was named the Beloved in whom God was well pleased. (Matthew 3) But here we find him sending a message to Jesus asking "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Matthew 11.2)

It is as though the wonderful promise spoken of in Isaiah is ringing very hollowly in John's ears – where is the joy of a desert in bloom, weak hands made strong and feeble knees made firm, sight, mobility, speech restored? Where is the satisfaction of seeing vengeance exacted upon enemies? It doesn't look like God will "come and save" him. John, the desert prophet, is, according to Matthew, "the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."'" But Isaiah's highway through the transformed desert, the Holy Way from which not even fools could go astray, is not so straight or lined with verdant growth for John – where is the powerful leader he foretold, wielding an axe in one hand to cut down the fruitless and a winnowing fork in the other to separate out and burn the useless chaff with unquenchable fire? (Matthew 3.9-21) What has come of the revolution of the wild prophet of liberation, who is now shackled in prison – soon to be beheaded at the whim of Salome? What of the promised reign of justice for the lowly and oppressed? It is a devastating story. His words speak of bewilderment and perhaps bitterness – "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Before looking at Jesus' reply let us sit with John in prison and reflect on all the people that are today shackled in one kind of prison of injustice or another – those living in poverty as the richest of the world grow proportionately ever richer, the unprecedented numbers of people displaced by that poverty and by war, and the victims of discrimination and prejudice. Let us think of the many people in the course of history for whom, like John, justice did not arrive on time – lives ended in slavery or internment, people forcibly removed from ancestral lands never to return, all those political prisoners and brave speakers and writers known to organisations like Amnesty and PEN International, and all those whose suffering and persecution goes unnoticed.

John's doubt also makes me think of passionate idealistic people who have dedicated their lives to a cause, only to face obstacles and heartache, and come to question whether they have wasted their breath and time. I think of young activists today, sometimes seen as wild eyed and strange, and pray their hope will not be extinguished by the enormity of the problems facing our planet, and the world's apathy, greed and blindness.

And what of our own hearts and minds, so deeply intertwined with the public realm and the natural world – do we feel bleak and cynical? And, as for our private selves – what have been our expectations, longings and hopes? Are there things that we despair of, are we exhausted and lacking in motivation because we have lost faith in

something or doubt ourselves or others? In our lowest moments, do we look back on our life and think “is that it? I was hoping for more.” Do we read about the healing work and teachings of Jesus and feel unmoved, wondering how he touches us?

These are the situations and realities that we, like John’s messengers, bring to Jesus. Are you going to deliver or should we wait for something better? Are you, Jesus the Christ, the one who is to come? Yes. Are we to wait for another? No, but there is a sense in which we are always waiting for “the One” to come – Christ is here yet at the same time is also “the one to come.” The incarnation is but one part of the process in the ongoing unfolding of the kingdom, the ongoing process of creation and transformation. In a sense, we will always be waiting – Christ is always being born, always dying and always rising. So yes, the work of transformation, of bringing God’s kingdom near, has begun. Jesus responds to John, describing what he has been doing in words echoing various passages in Isaiah – the prophet of hope to an exiled and oppressed people.

‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.’

Blessed is anyone who does not look away, run away, or take fright at the disturbance to their world. In the chapter before this correspondence, Jesus teaches about the high cost of following him – the risk of persecution and being “dragged before kings and governors” (Matthew 10:18), as John has been. The One has come but the kingdom is still coming. Jesus tells those who follow him they need to be prepared to disrupt the social order but that the kingdom of peace will draw nearer through their actions as they follow the man on a donkey, not a warrior king on a white steed.

So reassure John, says Jesus, that the great work is underway. We are not told John’s response but we can hope that it was one of deep spiritual joy for had helped prepare the way. Even the darkest of prisons cannot overcome such light.

Jesus then turns to the crowds and affirms John as a prophet – an uncompromising voice in the wilderness – not a reed shaken in the wind; down to earth and brave – commanding attention by his authenticity rather than by wealth and worldly power. John exhorted people to “Prepare the way of [not for] the Lord” – to prepare themselves and not idly wait for God to arrive and sort it all out. Were you not called, Jesus asks, to venture out and experience something? “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?” … What then did you go out to see?” If not a trendy but shaky reed or a pampered showman, then who? The wild one who calls *you* to prepare the way, to walk the Holy Way of the Lord.

I was at first puzzled by the final verse “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” But if we recall that John himself said he was unworthy to tie the anointed one’s sandal yet was requested to baptise Jesus, it begins to make sense. The Song of Mary proclaims that the lowly are lifted, and elsewhere in the status-reversing teaching of our servant king, we hear how the least shall be first. In essence none of our worldly hierarchies are applicable – all of us, even or especially, the most “unimportant” and “foolish” of us are walkers on the Holy Way and co-creators of this new world.

So all this is the good news in which we can rejoice. This is the great strength and joy of Mary’s Song which celebrates the opening of a heart to enable the fulfillment of a promise – My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord: “My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, from this day all generations will call me blessed.” Mary has consented to being the Mother of God and from this momentous yes now flows justice and release - the lowly are being lifted up, and the hungry are being filled with good things. The Song of Mary celebrates the real possibility that is available to us in every present moment, of being liberated and seeing wrongs put to right.

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.’ (Isaiah 35.3–4) Likewise, James counsels patience and urges us to strengthen our hearts, just as the farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth following the rains. The grace of the Incarnation comes to us as gift, but we play our part in the nativity scene of the cosmos, by preparing the manger – what we do, as caretakers of one another and as pilgrims in the world, really counts. In order for Advent to become Christmas in our lives, we can’t simply wait. When we open our souls, streams will break forth with joy and flood the dry and parched places, bringing to life the seeds that have lain dormant in desert sands and bare fields.