

11 December 2022

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

“Terror and doom, and wrath to come, John your herald preached.” So begins the Collect appointed for today.¹ That message and tone seem completely out of place alongside the theme of joy which is supposed to permeate our worship today. The third Sunday in Advent has come to be known as Gaudete Sunday, which we could translate as “Rejoice Sunday”, the word *Gaudete* coming from the first word of the introit sentence set down for the day in the Latin Mass: from Philippians 4, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!”² This day represents a temporary relief from the otherwise relatively sober and penitential character of the rest of the season, and we represent this by a lightening up from our Advent violet, choosing pink for the candle in our wreath and for my stole today.

“Terror and doom” on the one hand; “Rejoice!” on the other. The contrast is strange; maybe even challenging. But it is a contrast or paradox that many of us feel too in relation to life as we experience it. We know the good news of Jesus. We know that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father ruling over all creation. We know the message of salvation, redemption, reconciliation, renewal and new creation. And yet so much of what we see around us is violence and corruption and oppression, hurt and disappointment and despair, illness and death and decay, hardship and discomfort and need, polarisation and intolerance and misinformation, instability and confusing change and loss of dreams.

We may feel a bit like John the Baptist, confused at what he has seen and what he now hears is going on, sending some of his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one? Or should we expect another?”

¹ *The Lectionary/Te Maramataka: Year A – 2023*, p.12; also in *A New Zealand Prayer Book/He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa* p. 653.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaudete_Sunday

John has been waiting for the Christ, the Messiah; he received Jesus as the Messiah at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when he baptised Jesus in the Jordan. At that time it had all seemed so clear to him.

However, a couple of years on John isn't quite so sure that he sees in Jesus what he was waiting for. John is now in King Herod's prison, and is thus all too aware of the continuing power of the secular kingdom. In popular expectation the Messiah was to overthrow the oppressors and re-establish the nation of Israel under the reign of *God* rather than being under the reign of foreign powers and their puppet kings. Jesus doesn't seem to be doing this, and thus his Messiahship is called into question – “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”

But Jesus answers John's disciples by pointing to the evidence; not in terms of approach, but in terms of results, outcomes: “Go back and report to John what you 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 being preached to the poor.”

There are echoes here of Isaiah 35, and verses also from Isaiah 61, all of which formed part of the ancient Messianic expectation.

Jesus is saying: it may not look quite like what you expected messiahship to be, but look at the results.

Jesus has made his reply in oblique fashion. He doesn't say “I am in fact the Messiah.” Instead he uses this phrase, “the blind receive sight, the lame walk, ...” and so on: it is almost as if he's using a code that John might decipher, but other hearers might find unintelligible. Why this oblique, coded, answer? The reason is that there was already a king of the Jews, and the dynasty of Herod was not known for its tolerance of rival claimants to the throne. Indeed few kings in history have tolerated rivals.

Jesus concludes his statement of the evidence for his Messiahship, saying:

“Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” (Matt 11:6)

This can also be translated “Blessed is the one who is not tripped up by me” or “Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me.” This may seem a bit of a surprising thing for Jesus to say. But the point is that what Jesus has been saying

and doing may not tally with expectations, and as a result he may cause offense. He neither meets the expectations of those looking for a military messiah, nor of those who expect simply a teacher in traditional rabbinical mode, nor of those expecting this simple carpenter from Nazareth to maintain the religious, political, social, and economic status-quo. Blessed are those with the spiritual discernment to see God's mighty presence in what Jesus is doing, and so not take offence, and not lose faith.

John's disciples leave, and Jesus turns his attention to the crowd:

"What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 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."

John had attracted quite a following – many people had gone out into the desert to him. I spoke about this last week. 'What was the attraction?' Jesus asks. Were you going out to see a political figure who is swayed by the winds of public opinion? There may be a play on words here, because a Galilean reed was the very symbol Herod had chosen to display on some of his coins. 'Did you go to see someone dressed in royal finery?' asks Jesus.

Of course they didn't: No politician, no king, no Herod could be the Messiah, or anything to do with him – the Herods of the world stood for everything the Messiah was expected to overthrow.

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

I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist."

John is not just any old prophet: he is the one prophesied by Malachi, the one who goes before the Lord himself, preparing the way for God's judgment. He is therefore the greatest of all prophets.

So what were you waiting for? You went to see a prophet, and you found *this* prophet, the forerunner to the Lord himself, preaching the need for hearts to be prepared for the breaking in of the kingdom of God. So has it made any difference? Are you receptive to the work of the kingdom now occurring in your very midst?

But as great a prophet as John the Baptist may have been, he is nothing compared to what he prophesied about. John is the last of the old order; a *new* thing is occurring – the kingdom of God is impinging on human affairs, the foretold Messiah is here, and those who enter the kingdom he is inaugurating are as a result greater than that great prophet who foretold its coming.

Maybe John the Baptist's question of Jesus related to his personal situation. Why was John still in prison? If Jesus really was the Messiah, why didn't he free prisoners like John as well as giving the blind their sight, and so on?

The words of James in his epistle might just as readily have been addressed to John's plight: "Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near." The rightful King and judge is known, and has begun his work but it is not yet complete. It is for that reason that you should not expect everything to be sorted out in the present. What we might describe as the "now, and not yet" of the gospel is an important understanding to hold on to as we look at the state of the world we live in now, and at the state of our own lives.

"Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near." These words of James are similar to those of Paul in Philippians, the verses from which we get our Gaudete rejoicing: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. *The Lord is near.*"

The answer to the challenge or paradox with which I opened, the question of how we go about rejoicing in the midst of the terror and doom of the age in which we live, is found the fact that the Lord is near.

We tend to hear the injunction to "Rejoice always" as telling us that we have to be happy; we hear it as directing us to feel something we may not feel. But actually the sense of it is much more that we are told to *celebrate*.³ And what do we celebrate? We celebrate the fact that the Lord is near. We celebrate the evidence of the in-breaking of his kingly reign among us. Above all we celebrate *who* it is that is at

³ Wright, *Prison Letters*, p.130

work: Jesus the Messiah. When Jesus talks about John he is really pointing to himself, albeit obliquely.

As we think about God's kingdom we risk two extremes. At one end is the view that we can by our own efforts determine the timing of the return of the Lord – this has been the view of certain world-leaders at various times, seeing themselves as bringing about God's reign through military means. They see the kingdom as being all about the present.

At the other extreme is the view that there is nothing for us to do – it all lies in God's hands and all lies in the future.

In fact, the kingdom is both now and not yet, both present and future.

The biblical vision for the future, reflected in Isaiah's prophecy, is for the new heavens and new earth, the new creation, transformed out of the existing creation by the Spirit of God when Christ returns in glory and takes up his rightful place as ruler over all.

And we the Church have a role in being builders for and towards this future, proclaiming that Jesus is the world's true King, and out of obedience to that King working for the well-being of the community and world in which we live.

In Christ Jesus God has inaugurated his kingdom, his reign of justice and peace. We experience his kingdom now – when people receive healing, when the good news is preached, when justice is done, when God's people overcome their differences and live together in unity. We should celebrate these things.

We can celebrate such things as generous sharing between those who have relatively much with those who have little – for example, the gift by our diocese of 25% of the proceeds from the sale of Holy Trinity Avalon to our brethren in Te Upoko o te Ika;⁴ and the work of the Wellington City Mission to establish a place of dignity and welcome to those on the margins of society.⁵ We can celebrate the work of parishes such as ours supporting the settlement of refugees in our community, building bridges across cultures and faiths. We can celebrate the work of the

⁴ <https://anglicanmovement.nz/blog/4obk51tn72db512xvaw1juzuojkvod?rq=Synod%202022>

⁵ <https://anglicanmovement.nz/whakamaru>

Bishop's Community Development Trust resourcing community hubs and community development in places facing hardship and fragmentation.⁶ We can celebrate the collaboration between funders, mentors, and parish leaders to place youth workers into intermediate and secondary schools to provide pastoral support and facilitate behavioural change.

In Christ Jesus God has inaugurated his kingly reign. The present is not straightforward, and what can be achieved is only partial, because God's reign is not yet complete. But we *do* experience, and therefore should celebrate, his kingdom among us now.

We are called to participate in both the waiting for the coming of God's kingdom in all its fullness, and in the living of it right now as we act as God's agents of proclamation, healing, justice, peace and reconciliation.

With John we may well say something like "It doesn't look like what I expected. I'm doubting myself and my trust in you." But the ambiguity of the present – the tension between "terror and doom" and "rejoice always" – demands decision and faithfulness in us:⁷

- Decision, in that we have to make an active choice as to whether we will be part of the in-breaking of God's kingly reign or not; and
- Faithfulness, in that if we decide for Jesus we are deciding for, not a life of ease and bliss, but a life of commitment and suffering.

And in this life we rejoice. We rejoice because the Lord is near; we rejoice because *it is the Lord* who is near.

⁶ For example, in Shannon. See <https://anglicanmovement.nz/blog/shannon-kai-hub?rq=Shannon>

⁷ Osborne, p. 416

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