

ADVENT 3 Year A 15<sup>th</sup> Dec 2019

Matthew 11:2-11

Isaiah 35:1-10

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Today is the third Sunday in Advent. Advent comes from the Latin word, 'COMING'. In Advent we look forward to the coming of God in the Christ.

Each Advent, John the Baptist gets a couple of weeks of attention in the lectionary as he was such a strong prophetic figure of what it meant to look with hopefulness and expectancy. And yet I was also reflecting last week on how John the Baptist and Jesus part company in some significant ways. John has a very apocalyptic outlook where the ax is laying at the foot of the tree, the good will be rewarded and the bad will be punished in this huge inbreaking of God's activity which he expected.

Except that the inbreaking of God turned out to be different to what John expected. Whereas John's emphasis was on the great separation of good and evil, Jesus exercised a great inclusion and compassion and mercy towards those who the religious authorities wanted to characterize as sinners. 'Judge NOT, for as you judge others, so you will be judged' Jesus says (Matthew 7:1-2). The WORD of judgement which Jesus proclaims in a judgement of mercy and forgiveness.

John was no doubt very puzzled by all this. So John sends some messengers to Jesus to ask Jesus what's going on. When John's disciples come to Jesus, Jesus suggests that they go back to John with the experience of what they have observed. Jesus doesn't say, "Yes" or "no" – he asks them to open their eyes and pay attention.

Jesus invites them to see the evidence of changed lives and gives six examples:

1. THE BLIND RECEIVE THEIR SIGHT [Isa 29:18 35:5, 42:7]
2. THE LAME WALK [Isa 35:6]
3. THE LEPERS ARE CLEANSED
4. THE DEAF HEAR [Isa 29:18, 35:5]
5. THE DEAD ARE RAISED [Ezekiel 37:5]
6. THE POOR HAVE GOOD NEWS BROUGHT TO THEM [Isa 29:19, 52:7, 62:1]

All of these things had been named by the prophets as examples of God's actions in a renewed world. And it's important to note, when Jesus quotes from the Isaiah, he leaves OUT the words, 'God will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense'. But he *includes* verses either side about God's healing of the world.

Even the way that Matthew's gospel is constructed points to this. After the birth narratives and Jesus' founding sermon on the Mount, there are a whole series of stories in quick succession of where Jesus heals, casts out demons, and raises the dead.

Jesus' teaching style is very grounded. He ACTS – he DOES what he's talking about – and then he points to those things and asks people do draw their own conclusions – it's as if he's saying, "do you see the work of God here?" Do you not perceive the power of God in what I'm doing?

When I was in my atheist teens and agnostic early 20's one of the things which really helped move me towards God was the witness of humble Christian service. In Tasmania I would be the pub with my drunken mates just about every Friday night the local Salvation Army guy would wander through offering copies of the Salvo' newsletter. Then a few years later in St Kilda I would see the Salvos pulling drunks out of the gutters. The lame were given their legs again. The poor had good news proclaimed to them. It got me thinking about where such deep compassion came from.

I remember chemistry teachers in labs at high school doing these things. They would combine two chemicals to produce a room full of rotten egg gas, or they would blow something up – and once they'd got our attention, they's say, "right – what just happened"? The chemical formulas are far more interesting when you are fanning away the dust and debris of a fantastic explosion.

God's activity in the world is an explosion of the Spirit.

When we look at the world around us, we see many signs of destruction. But if we were looking for signs of God, what would we see? Two thousands years after the birth of Christ:

THE BLIND ARE GIVEN TRANSPLANTED EYES  
THE LAME ARE GIVEN NEW LIMBS  
THOSE WITH SKIN DISEASES ARE HEALED  
THE DEAF ARE GIVEN BIONIC EARS  
THE DEAD ARE QUITE LITERALLY BROUGHT BACK TO LIFE in intensive care  
                  departments of our hospitals  
AND THE POOR ARE RECEIVING life through an explosion of churches and other  
                  NGO relief agencies

Advent and Christmas is not a history lesson which looks to the past. It a current and emerging future – Christ has died. Christ IS risen, Christ WILL come again and again and again. Amen.