

St. Mary's Holy Communion Sunday 11th December 2016**3rd Sunday of Advent****Isaiah 35:1-10 James 5:7-10 Matthew 11:2-11**

Today is the third Sunday in Advent – it is also known as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete in Latin means 'rejoice'. The name comes from the opening of the Mass for that day: Gaudete in Domine Semper, 'Rejoice in the Lord always'.

This is a Sunday to rejoice! This may seem a bit odd given that there are a lot of parties and celebration going on at the moment. It may also seem a bit odd – given the Gospel reading – John the Baptist sitting in prison with his own uncertainty and doubts. What does he have to Gaudete about?

There was a time when Advent was a season of strict fasting similar to Lent. During this time (5th-12th centuries) flowers and musical instruments were forbidden in church during Advent and Lent and clergy were always robed in purple or black.

But on the middle Sunday of Advent – music and flowers were permitted and priests and deacons would wear rose-coloured vestments (have to do with pink glasses) to mark this day of relief in the middle of the fast.

Gaudete Sunday is also a reminder that Advent is passing quickly and that the Lord's coming is near. The focus is turning more to the second coming than the first and there is a heightened sense of intense joy, gladness and expectation.

The Gospel readings for Gaudete Sunday always revolve around John the Baptist as the whole thrust of John's ministry is the announcement that the Lord's coming is near – in fact – nearer than you think.

But...John is sitting in prison – having been sent there by Herod. John had been attacking Herod over marrying his brother's ex-wife which was less than appropriate. John had also been announcing that the Kingdom of God – the true kingdom was coming. Herod wasn't the real king; God would replace him. I suspect that John was not experiencing intense joy or gladness and his expectations of getting out alive may have been low.

Four walls closing in must surely have limited his vision. So much so that John sent his disciples to Jesus with the question 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'

There are some thoughts about why John asked that question...

One suggestion is that John was disappointed – he had heard about what Jesus was doing and it didn't sound like what John thought it would be like. Maybe he was expecting Jesus to be a man of fire who would sweep through Israel as

Elijah did and right all the wrongs. Maybe Jesus was supposed to confront Herod, topple him from his throne, become king in his palace, get John out of prison and give him a place of honour – or at least let him live.

But Jesus is not doing this – he is befriending the sinners, the tax collectors, ordinary men and women and teaching them about the things of God. Maybe not doing what John wanted him to do. So maybe John is thinking was wrong?!

The other suggestion for John's question is that he wants to know if it is safe for him to give up – to hand the mission on. John was the one to herald the coming of God's Messiah – how could he do that from a prison cell? Maybe he couldn't relax until he knew whether or not he had done his job. John's ministry only lasted about a year – maybe John did not imagine that his purpose would be fulfilled so quickly.

John is waiting (perhaps getting a little short on patience) and hoping. John is waiting to see if what he has done in the past was right; waiting in the present to see if Jesus is the one; and waiting to see if there is another yet to come. The three-fold Advent waiting of past, present and future that Anna spoke of 2 weeks ago. Robin spoke of hope in his sermon last week that is rooted in reality, with clear-eyed perception of where we are now. No doubt that prison was doing that for John.

In his waiting and hoping – John gets an answer back.

And it probably wasn't what he was expecting! What Jesus sent back could not be more different from the message that John preached. John shouted for repentance in the face of the wrath of God: he spoke of axes cutting down dead trees and unquenchable fires.

Jesus speaks of mercy, healing and rejoicing. Jesus lists the great signs of the coming of the Messiah which had all been prophesied in the past. Jesus answers John by quoting Isaiah 35 – which John would have known. It is a message all about John – the wilderness which was John's home will rejoice and bloom, the fearful are to be comforted – John is in prison, awaiting certain death – how can he not be afraid?

John preached the judgment and vengeance of God and in Isaiah, God's wrath is an instrument of salvation for the weak and the fearful. Very clearly the Messiah had arrived. John had done his job – he could hand it over.

I think that John knew that Jesus was the Messiah. After all – John was the baby that leapt in his mother Elizabeth's womb when her cousin Mary and her baby (Jesus) came to visit. John the Baptizer knew Jesus the Messiah the moment he saw him at the Jordan River. John knew in his head who Jesus really was.

But time and circumstance can dull the image on our faith perception and leave us feeling not sure *what* we believe.

I think John's question had more to do with his heart than his head. John had heard about the miracles and healings Jesus was doing for others and perhaps his faith was shaken.

He certainly could have used a miracle for himself – and he didn't appear to be getting one. And sitting in that prison cell – he might have been having a little trouble knowing it with his heart. Sometimes our faith gets shaken by what we don't get or what God didn't do for us personally.

I spoke to an older lady this past week that was very honest about where she was at with faith. She told me that after her husband had died after a long period of illness – he was wheelchair bound and she was his carer – she came to the conclusion that 'if there was a God – why did her husband suffer the way he did?' She couldn't believe in a God like that. Neither can I.

I don't have a good answer for that question – there are theological or doctrinal answers that are pastorally unhelpful in these situations. Equally there are pastoral answers that deny the theological problems these situations raise.

Either way – many of us have endured long stretches of suffering – waiting and waiting for God to come through for us. And maybe in those times we have seen or heard of wondrous works He was doing elsewhere. And it hurts! It is painful! The doubts that these types of situations create are probably not coming from our heads but our hearts, our feelings, our hurts.

John was not like 'a reed swayed by the wind' – he was a man of conviction. He was a man of little personal vanity and had a huge commitment to God's kingdom. He was not one to buckle under pressure! Therefore I think it is safe to have some of our own doubts – if a man like that can!

Jesus answers John in his doubts – very lovingly and very simply – even if it was not the answer John was expecting or even wanting. Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God and he is telling John and us – that is it happening – it is breaking in.

John was the fulfilment of prophecy and Jesus tells us he was the greatest man ever born but he is still outside.

John had to let go of his own interpretations and rejoice in God's new work in Christ.

A quote from Ann Garrido's Advent Reflections for Dec 11th:

Today the Church is garbed in pink – that colour of hope in the midst of darkness. We are reminded that even though daylight is difficult to come by and waiting is hard, we are not to cave in to despair but to be open to and sustained by those signs already present in the world around us that let us know that God *is* at work. While we have not seen the kingdom of God yet in its fullness, there are ways in which that future is breaking into our own time even now –bursts of illumination and freedom, connection and healing. Our faith does not hinge on promises still unfulfilled but on promises in the process of being fulfilled this very day.

So from the James reading: You also must be patient, Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

And ... *Gaudete in Domine Semper.*