Sermon for 3rd in Advent Year A

Readings : Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11.

i

I am one of five children brought up in a three bedroomed house not much bigger than what you see on *Coronation Street*. These were the days before *en suite* bathrooms and homes with multiple toilets and walk-in wardrobes. If we all had a pair of shoes, a pair of winter boots, a pair of sports shoes and a pair of summer sandals and a pair of slippers, we would have 70 items of footwear. Then think of all the trousers, socks, shirts, plates, forks, coats and all the paraphernalia that makes up a family home – add in a cat and a few guinea pigs - and you’ll appreciate that our house was pretty full!

We also had an Aunt Polly. She came from Sheffield – the posh end. She went on a grand tour of relatives every spring and duly descended on our household every year for high tea. So every year it was all hands on deck to clean, polish and dust everything to within an inch of its life and to push, cram and hide all the clutter beneath, behind or within whatever item of furniture could be persuaded to gorge itself yet fuller. During the visit we had to be very careful about which cupboards or drawers we opened, lest we unleash a tsunami of household knickknacks and buried diminutive Aunt Polly in the process.

My mother dreaded Aunt Polly’s annual visit, but we children rather enjoyed the event and mucked in with the cleaning with great gusto, and put on our best behaviour during tea to try and pass the inspection parade with flying colours. Fortunately, Aunt Polly always wrote a letter to warn us of the date of our visitation.

It is sobering to think that I put less effort into preparing for Christmas during Advent than I used to put into preparing for Aunt Polly’s annual visit.

Fortunately, God warned us about the imminent arrival of his Son by sending us a warning letter in the shape of John the Baptist. If anyone was designed to galvanise people into action it was John. He put a metaphorical stick of dynamite under the people of Israel to prepare the way of the Lord.

He spoke in dramatic and doom-laden pronouncements, excoriating the religious leaders of the day, the brood of vipers, as he called them, and warning everyone to repent and be baptised in preparation, for the axe was already laid at the root of the trees that produced no fruit.

In a similar vein, the Church has Advent as a wake-up call to all Christian believers to prepare for the coming of the Christ into the world at Christmas. It is a season for all Christians to engage in a spiritual house cleaning so that we might be truly prepared for the momentous events of Christmas.

ii

In our reading from Matthew 11:2-11, we can see that John the Baptist needed some reassurance that he had got it right when at Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan he declared Jesus the ‘Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.’

On the one hand, John had heard about what ‘the Christ’, that is, what the Messiah was reputedly doing from his prison cell. That supposes he did still believe he was right in declaring Jesus the One who would ‘baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire’: So why the need to double-check?

I think it may be that John had spoken of the coming of Christ in apocalyptic, cataclysmic terms of judgement and upheaval; yet Jesus seemed to be more like a gentle summer breeze than a whirlwind. So had John been right?

Jesus responds to the question in a typically gentle way. He quotes Isaiah 35 with its gentle imagery of new life – a passage also quoted in the Qumran *Dead Sea Scrolls* in this messianic sense. Isaiah speaks of a shower of rain on the parched desert; of the glory and splendour of an opening flower; of a helping hand to enfeebled, elderly limbs; of eyes made to see and ears made to hear again; of the speechless tongue given a new voice; of grass and reeds growing in the desert and pools of cool water in the sand.

Significantly – there will be **no** lions or ferocious beasts on the highway across the desert leading to Zion and the redeemed will not enter with war cries or shouts of triumphalism over defeated enemies, but singing songs of joy.

The Baptist hadn’t been wrong in proclaiming Jesus the Christ, but he had been wrong in the nature of Christ’s coming: it was far gentler than he had envisaged.

Jesus quoted these words of Isaiah in his response to the Baptist’s emissaries because it answered John’s question most fully and yet most circumspectly at the same time. It was a full response because Jesus quoted a passage that was understood to be a messianic reference – as the *Dead Sea Scrolls* further attest.

But it was also a circumspect answer because he wanted to avoid using the actual word ‘Messiah’. For John was in Herod Antipas’ prison cell asking about a Messiah – and we know how his father, Herod the Great, had reacted when people asked him about a would-be Messiah.

So Jesus answers in code. Yes, he is the Messiah, because he quotes a messianic text to describe his work which John has heard about, but he quotes one of the more gentle images available from Isaiah 35 to tell John that his gentle style of Messiahship is in keeping with scriptural prophecies.

If Herod intercepts that message to John, it will not necessarily be understood by his jailors.

iii

Some scholars look at John’s enquiry and wonder if John was hoping that Jesus would free him from prison – after all – the Messiah shall set at liberty those who are in prison? But there is no evidence within the text that supports this inference.

It is true that the kingdom of God is arriving in Jesus, but this does not mean the immediate solution to all problems, the establishment of world peace, the liberty of all those unjustly held in prison. The kingdom has arrived in Jesus and it is real and effective, but it is like a seed growing secretly, it is like a tiny grain of mustard that will take time to grow into a mighty tree for all the birds of the air to make their nests.

The ultimate victory of the kingdom of heaven is secure once Jesus has been raised from the grave, but that does not mean that the work is complete. This is the role of the Church.

Now the Church is commissioned to prepare the way for the kingdom to come. Now the Church has the task to call people to repentance and to receive them into the life-changing foretaste of the kingdom through the sacraments and teaching and worship of the Church.

Just as I, as a boy, frantically cleaned and polished for Aunt Polly’s visit, so too the Church is called to prepare peoples’ hearts and lives for the kingdom of heaven.

John was the greatest man ever born, said Jesus, and yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. This is because John had the unsurpassable privilege of announcing the coming of the Messiah , but also John died before seeing the inauguration of the kingdom; he died before Christ was crucified and before Christ was raised; John never knew baptism into the new kingdom.

To speak about John in such terms was remarkable because even the authorities in Jerusalem were reluctant to speak ill of John because he had been such a folk hero among the people. To say that John was the greatest ever born would have been gladly heard by many ordinary citizens, but to hear Jesus say that the least of those in the kingdom of heaven are greater than John would have been extremely challenging.

It reveals to us how Jesus understood the nature of his own work. To have said such a controversial thing about John has all the hallmarks of an authentic saying from the lips of Jesus; and as a by-product it tells us that the claims that Jesus has changed the world forever were not just inventions of his disappointed followers after his death, but were part of Jesus’ own understanding of his divine status and world-defining life.

Upon receiving the reassurance he craved, John was emboldened to face up to the immorality of Herod Antipas and denounce his adulterous marriage, knowing the likely consequences. Knowing that Jesus was the Messiah, John was able to face death. He was able to stand up for what he believed to be God’s moral values about fidelity and love, no matter what the consequences.

As we prepare this Advent to welcome Jesus as the Son of God, announced by prophets and angelic hosts, worshipped by shepherds and Magi from the east, we need to ask ourselves whether the Christmas story has sufficiently emboldened us to live according to our faith in the face of a disbelieving and dismissive generation.

If the answer is no, in what way can we still claim to be greater than John?

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