



Third Sunday in Advent

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 11 December 2022

READINGS

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-10 or Luke 1:46b-55; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Gaudete Sunday

The entrance antiphon from Phil 4:4 says: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!! The Lord is near”. But it is the Latin “Gaudete semper in Domino” that gives us Gaudete Sunday—a Sunday marked with joy because the Lord is near. Today we begin the second half of Advent which focuses more on preparation for the celebration of Christ’s birth at Bethlehem.

Advent is a season of hopeful expectation. The season is divided into two parts. In the first part we focus on our preparation for the time when Christ will return to judge the living and the dead. Science points to the fact that the universe continues to expand. As the universe had a beginning, so we believe that it will also have an end, when Christ will return in glory to judge the living and the dead.

The first reading speaks in terms of a barren wilderness being transformed into an oasis of abundance and links it to the second reading where St James speaks of the farmer’s patience in waiting for the rain to come and for the harvest to yield its plentiful produce. A key word to appreciating “joy” is the word patience because the Gospel leads us not into an oasis or a farm but into the life of a man named John the Baptist. Last week we heard how this feisty prophet challenged the religious elite (the Pharisees and Sadducees) of their arrogance and called them “brood of vipers”.

Imagine him driven by the passion of God as he preaches penitence and calls people to holiness, all in preparation for the Messiah’s coming. Fearless in his righteous indignation, he was locked up in prison for attacking the political establishment in the name of the Kingdom of God. We only find out later (in chapter 14) that John had openly criticised King Herod for marrying his brother’s wife. Very soon his life will come to a violent end when Herod’s lovely new stepdaughter asks for John’s head on a platter.

So, John hears of Jesus - his cousin’s work and he is perhaps filled with doubt with regard to his identity. Remember that Jesus eats with sinners, drunkards, prostitutes and from the sound of it, it does not seem like Jesus is the Messiah. It’s all a big disappointment for John. He begins to doubt whether he had it right after all. Maybe God had someone else in mind for Messiah - this Jesus he hears of couldn’t have been the Messiah.

In some sense, this is John’s moment of Calvary, his moment when that sinking feeling of abandonment - he is wondering: could he have made a terrible mistake by believing in in this rabbi from Nazareth?

Languishing in that prison cell, his trust wanes and he realises that for all his stinging attack on the religious establishment, he might actually have to pay for it with his own life. His question therefore, isn't some intellectual fascination; it is heartfelt. "Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?"

And then, Instead of "I am the Messiah", Jesus directs John's disciples to the first reading: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, then the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy". And Jesus ends with "Happy is the man who does not lose faith in me".

And so, John the Baptist is faced with the knowledge that he would never be able to continue his mission or see its ending; death is imminent for him: yet you can picture the joy he must have felt when word got back to him from Jesus that "the deaf hear, the lame walk and those with impaired speech sing for joy" John's joy came from knowing that his life has not been in vain. He finally understood that his was a work of preparation – patient preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

Jesus' reply to John is a clue for us too - to look for the signs, and see the good that is happening.

All around us we see other people, far and near too, who have little to celebrate, and less to hope for; people who are living with sadness or uncertainty or worry whose lives have fallen apart, whether through illness, or injustice, or accident, or poverty, any circumstances they can't control.

That is what suffering really means. When we can't change things for the better. But God can, and with God's help, other people can.

Gaudete teaches us patience in our valley of tears. True joy or happiness cannot be contrived but is a gift from having lived faithfully believing that though our lives may experience the long dry desert of waiting patiently for an answer, the answer has already been given – Christ is the answer. He gives us this assurance that our lives will never be in vain, if we are faithful like John the Baptist was.

For this reason, even Isaiah's words this week have incredible power. "Everlasting joy shall be upon your head; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." (v.10). This is good news of hope in the midst of hopelessness, God breaks into the middle of our struggles and doubts and reminds us that life is indeed a highway, and we do not journey alone or in vain.

When have you been surprised, or uncertain, like John, about how God was at work in your life, and in the life of your family or community?

Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams*, 20th century author wrote:

"The very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof."

Yes, the Messiah is at work in the world, and yes, it is a broken world - one that constantly needs to be cared for.

Amen