

Sermon for Gaudete Sunday Advent 3 Dec 11th 2022

The seasons and their colours in the church's year are full of rich symbolism to enhance our worship- -a feast for the eye going down into the heart if we're willing and open. For the past two weeks Our colour has been purple. The colour for penitence, used in the solemn seasons of lent and advent.

Although we seem to have Christmas festivities all the way through advent, it is still a season of penitence where our focus in our worship is on the promised second coming of Christ as we prepare to celebrate his first coming.

We believe that the kingdom has already broken through into this world in the life death and resurrection of Jesus- -but it's yet to reach its consummation. When that will be we don't know but we do know that the world will end one day. Not only scripture but science tells us that.

We live in the between times between the first and second coming. How it will be finally we can't know. In these between times we continue living in the light of kingdom values, trusting in God, caring for his world and sharing the message of Jesus as best we can.

Yes, for the past two weeks our colour purple has reflected those solemn things. Today mike is resplendent in rose coloured robes and we have lit a beautiful pink candle because today is gaudete Sunday- -gaudete meaning, rejoice! Gaudete is simply the first word in the ancient Latin liturgy of the church for this day, the third of advent, going back centuries. The colour changes to a lighter brighter colour to reflect that theme of rejoicing. Our hymns are always carefully chosen by mike to reflect our theme and today's are particularly rich! Hark the glad sound the saviour comes! Rejoice the Lord is king! Hills of the North rejoice! Maybe you always take your hymn sheets home and look at them again. If not, why not start the habit today. They'll go on giving you plenty of food for thought and meditation.

But wait a minute, if you were concentrating on the gospel reading just now you might well be thinking, Hang on! If this is gaudete Sunday, a call to rejoice, our gospel reading with John the Baptist in prison is a strange one to choose.

John is in prison for fearlessly speaking the truth to power- -to king Herod. And what's more, in the darkness of the dungeon, in fear for his life, he is now wrestling in the darkness of doubt.

In the Gospel for last Sunday, we saw John as a powerful figure, heard his stirring words at the Jordan River concerning the one who is to come. Hordes of people were flocking to him, hanging on his every word, coming forward to be

baptised in response to his call to repentance to cleanse themselves in preparation for the coming of the eagerly awaited messiah

The Messiah, John proclaimed, will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, and he will exercise judgment.

A dramatic coming to say the least.

But Jesus doesn't really fit the mould. He comes on the scene as one who proclaims the kingdom of God, calls upon people to trust in God, heals the sick, and befriends tax collectors and persons labelled "sinners." It's little wonder that John, now sitting in prison with time to think, questions whether he might have been mistaken- -wonders if Jesus really is the one to come or not. Jesus fits neither John's expectations nor those of Jewish messianism in general. The traditional expectation of the messiah is of a warrior, kicking out the oppressors, the occupying forces, and ushering in a golden age for the chosen people.

John's doubts are perfectly understandable so he sends two of his disciples to Jesus with a direct question: "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

You can't get much more direct than that.

And what will he make of the answer?

In response Jesus says, "Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

On hearing this John will at once recall the passage in the writings of the great prophet Isaiah :<

*Isaiah 35: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*

tThis is the passage Jesus will choose to use on his first appearance as a rabbi in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth. Often called the Jesus manifesto

This is concrete evidence of prophecy being fulfilled in action. It will surely give John confidence that he has not been mistaken after all, A bright light in his current darkness. Cause for rejoicing indeed.

Jesus goes on to affirm John's ministry not mincing his words. Doubtless John's followers will take these words back to him as well. And In the verses immediately following our reading, Jesus declares that John is the last and greatest in the line of the prophets, The second Elijah who is to come and prepare the way for God's anointed one- -the Messiah- -or in Greek, the Christ.

It's highly unlikely that any one of us will ever literally go to prison, but in the sense that prison is about our freedom being restricted, we can feel imprisoned by many things as we go through life and the world might sometimes feel very dark and fill us, like John, with doubts. .The aging process, health issues both physical and mental in ourselves or those we love, grief and loss, lack of the things we feel we deserve or need, struggles of all kinds can restrict us, prevent us from doing or being what we long to do or be. And yes, like John we may be assailed by doubts when such prison walls threaten to close in around us. This is part and parcel of what it means to be human.

But we have a God who understands. Our great and mysterious God who is beyond our comprehension came into the world in Jesus Christ. to share the human condition with us. this is the great and mighty wonder that we celebrate not only once a year at Christmas but every week in the Eucharist.

Right after his awesome baptism by John where the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove the same spirit drives Jesus into the desert to be tested before taking up his ministry. And he is tempted both to use his powers wrongly and also to doubt who he really is. "If you are the son of God" comes that insidious little voice, Turn stones into bread, and so on. If you are the son of God, prove it! And think of that terrible cry of anguish from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Yes, it is OK to doubt, especially in times of darkness. John the Baptist experienced that desolation and so did even Jesus himself. We have a God who understands and loves us and suffers with us. That is a cause for great rejoicing whether or not we re in rejoicing mood at any given moment.

This kind of rejoicing does not depend on mood or circumstances. It comes from something, somewhere much deeper, much more profound, and eternal
So, gaudete! Amen

Carole Lewis