

*Sermon preached by Rev Rachel McDougall*

*St Paul's Canterbury*

*Advent 3A*

*Sunday 11 December 2022*

*Unexpected Joy*

Are you the one who is to come or are we waiting for someone else?

John the Baptist's words are full of uncertainty and longing.

What a contrast to the confident preparer of the way who we encountered last week. He knew what he was doing and said it clearly.

Now we see something else. Circumstances have changed.

Instead of a robust prophet we hear the question of a man who is stuck in prison, isolated and alone and wondering what it was all for.

Was it worth it?

John the Baptist voices a question that we all have – if Jesus has come and changed everything why does everything look the same?

Wasn't Jesus meant to get rid of the Romans and make Israel great again with winnowing fork in his hand?

From the darkness of his person JB wonders if it was all worth it and so sends his 'please explain' message.

John's question echoes with our questions when we find ourselves in difficulty or despair.

Isaiah answers this question in the first reading. The people of Israel have been asking a similar question.

They are in exile far from home and are wondering whether there is hope of return, whether there is joy to be found when all seems to be rubble and dislocation.

Isaiah's answer is to paint a picture of return, who gives voice to hope where creation is transformed – wildernesses become full of pools of water and human lives that are burdened by limitations are transformed into lives that are even better than before.

Not only will the lame walk, but they will leap, the speechless won't just talk but will sing with joy, the eyes of the blind are opened and there will be a highway home.

The people of God will return with singing and everlasting joy where sorrow and sighing flee away. It is a cascade of joy and hope.

God's promise is real and secure – it is what God wants for us.

Jesus' response to John is to tell John's followers go and tell JB what you hear and see.

Matthew presents Jesus as the great restorer the one who brings all God's people home from exile and the first chapters of Matthew's gospel illustrate this.

Jesus has healed a deaf man, cured someone who is paralysed, touches a leper and says to all Blessed are you are poor in spirit.

Jesus is the living embodiment of God with us, to bring forth new life and hope.

John the Baptist had to come to terms with Jesus being different from what he expected, - freedom and new life often wears a different face than we think.

It is different from what we imagine.

It is easy to be caught up like John in looking for a particular sort of answer because of our expectations.

Life doesn't often work like that. God has a different way of working.

It is curious that this story of John and his question is the focus for this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent often called Gaudete Sunday – the Sunday of joy.

For John stuck in prison there did not look to be much to celebrate, to be joyful about.

Jesus sent the message back to John saying it's real, tell the stories of what you hear and see. Lives are transformed, people feel they belong, hope is present.

You decide whether I'm the one.

I think the message here is that Jesus is the living God being with us and that we can live God's future now.

When life takes turns that we are not prepared for, God doesn't come to fix it all up as the great fixer from the sky.

Instead God is the one who is with us and accompanies us through the difficulties we face.

This is what Isaiah looked to – God's promise of hope is that we are with God and God is with us. We will be restored even if we can't quite see it yet.

Even Dietrich Bonhoeffer stuck in prison towards the end of the war wrote a poem called Who am I? wondering whether the life he lived had been worth it. And yet at the end of the poem he could write:

*Who am I? These lonely questions mock me.  
Whoever I am, You know me, I am yours, O God.*

He didn't live to see the outcome of WWII, but his life proclaimed a hope that was greater than the time he lived in. It was the same for Mabo who died before the judgement on Native title.

Each of these people faced significant challenges and still were able to live with hope that was greater than themselves and witnessed to a bigger future.

They responded to the call to live into this future and hold onto hope and joy.

Their lives and ours are to proclaim that we are not alone and that beauty and joy and transformed lives are possible.

As Buechner says:

*Joy is home... God created us in joy and for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and ourselves can separate us finally from that joy.  
We have God's joy in our blood.*

*Lectios:  
Isaiah 35.1-10  
Song of Mary  
Matthew 11.2-11*