

Advent Sermon on John the Baptist Matthew 11: 2-11

Waiting in Advent?

What for?

For happier times? A better world?

For our longing for peace and justice to be stilled?

Advent is a time of waiting and wondering, looking back and looking forward.

Advent is a time of hoping and searching.

Advent is the time of light shining in the darkness, peace overcoming conflict and war, and warmth entering the cold of the world we live in.

Advent is a chance of new beginnings – often small, but almost always significant.

Advent...

Today we begin our journey through Advent. The excitement starts building up. 4 weeks to go, and it is Christmas again.

We are reminded of all that still needs to be done. We make plans with friends and family. We decorate our homes; and all these activities actually because we are called to recall what this season is about: joy, peace, light and happiness.

These are God's gifts to us. But they don't come to us easily. We all know that this time of the year is not necessarily a happy one for everyone.

This can be one of the loneliest times of the year for some. It can be awful and cruel and painful.

Memories of deaths, of hurt, of broken relationships and lonely journeys through times of darkness ask to be taken seriously, as we start this journey through Advent. ...as we try to discover for ourselves and bring about for others images of hope – offered in this season of expecting the unexpected.

Our reading from Isaiah has a mood of such hope. Hope and even joy that come in unexpected ways. Here are exiles returning home through the desert. And the desert has been transformed into a highway toward home, a highway filled with blossoms and with abundant water.

This is a wonderful image!

...giving us glimpses of bloom, colour and life, inviting us to discover some Advent mood and Advent hope in it.

We are preparing. We are waiting. We are getting ready.

And we don't want to miss it... the hope that is promised and the joy available, when we eventually grasp that Jesus is – over and over again – coming in another way than the one we'd expected.

Our Gospel lesson today leads us right in the middle of all that: waiting, hoping, working for God's purposes in this world, and then – when God comes (in Jesus that is) being puzzled, worried and disappointed.

John had doubts about who Jesus was.

Are you the one?

He wasn't sure Jesus was the one he thinks he'd prepared the way for. He needed to find out. As he sat in prison, he struggled with what he had heard about Jesus. He questioned, he had doubts, he wondered.

He might have been thinking, "Lord, where did I go wrong? I did what I thought you wanted. I said what I thought you wanted me to say. You told me that the Messiah was coming. But where is he? Where's the fire, the ax, the judgment he's supposed to bring? And why, if he's here, would he let me stay in this place? I've heard rumours about Jesus. I thought I knew him well. I remember that glorious day in the Jordan when I baptized him. I knew it was all beginning then. God's whole plan was being put into play. But, where is he now? Why isn't he doing what I said he would do? Is he really the one or should I look for another?"

Wondering, having doubts, is that okay?

Do we shy away from these questions of doubts? As Christians do we secretly think doubts and questions of faith are wrong?

Who of us have not cried out with John,...

'Are you the Christ, or shall we look for another?'

...when life gets tough and we see innocent people suffer.

...when the bad so often succeed while the good fail.

...when we face a world locked in the death grip of one meaningless war after another;

...when we witness the destruction of nature as greed and desire for comforts drain the earth of her natural resources;

...when we choke on pollution and stumble over wrecked lives of people struck down by drugs and alcohol?

Is it not tempting to cry out 'If you are the Messiah, why this? Must we, shall we, look for another?'

John is not so far away from us, is he?

And it dawns on me that we probably have to understand (with John, I suppose) that faith does not have all the answers?

Faith is a risk.

Faith is a life of trust, not of certainty and security.

God never promised answers to all our questions. God never promised life without stress. He promises and gives only himself, with all the dangers and risks of personal encounters.

...the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them...

John had his doubts, he questioned, he wondered, but he did not stay with those doubts, he sought answers. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the one! If he was the Messiah?!

And now look with me at the answer Jesus gives. He says:

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.

Jesus answers John's question, not with just words, but he tells the disciples what has been done in the name of Jesus. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, etc. The good news of God has been brought to the earth. Jesus did not come with just the grim news of repentance, but with a love which says you are forgiven, you are to be made whole, you are good just as you are.

Jesus was telling them, "Look around, see what happens, and decide for yourselves.

What does the evidence show? Have the blind received sight?"

Can you remember the blind man Jesus met on the road? Making a paste from the dust in the road Jesus touched his eyes and his vision returned.

So, is Jesus the one?

Can you remember the deaf man who Jesus touched not just on but in the ear?

Or the man who lay by the pool for 38 years, and then stood up, took his mat and walked?

What do you think? Is Jesus the one?

What would Lazarus have answered – raised from the dead?

Or the woman caught in adultery who Jesus did not condemn?

Is he the one?

Jesus did not fit John's expectations, but Jesus showed clearly through his actions that he was the Messiah. ...that the world was changing, that God's great plan of salvation was starting to unfold. Only John did not really understand. The whole of John's life had been focussed on his conviction that he was the herald, preparing the way for the one who was to come to fulfil the promises and affirm the faith of the people.

Now he was in prison.

Realistically he must have known that his chances of getting out alive were slim.

If Jesus were not the one, what sense could John make out of what he had believed in? Was his whole life founded on an awful mistake?

Behind John's question was nothing less than the search for the meaning of his whole life... It is a question that comes to all of us at one time or another, isn't it?

I wonder what John thought when his disciples did return with the news about Jesus? Did he now believe with certainty that Jesus was the one? Did he see God's love and salvation unfolding upon the earth and embracing people's lives? Could John sense the hope, the life, the chances of a new beginning that Jesus was bringing to all people?

I hope so.

I hope that John, just shortly before his convictions cost him his life, could see and understand that his life was not in vain, that Jesus was the one he'd been preparing the way for.

I hope that John could see that Jesus fulfils the highest expectations of human values, that he could see and accept Jesus' outstanding love and self-giving, the wholeness he brought to people, the healing of body and soul, the forgiveness and the new self-respect to the sinner, the dignity and acceptance to the outcast...

All that and so much more...

I hope that John could hear the voice of Jesus inviting him and claiming him and all of us as God's beloved children.

I hope that John could hear what Jesus did not express in straight forward words: I am he... I am the one to who your unrest points. I am he – the one to come. I am the one who you and so many had hoped for. I am the fulfilment of the promises given to generations of people living in fear and dark, holding fast to the dream of salvation.

Instead of sending such clear words to John, who may have had only hours to live before Herodias would demand his head on a plate in the king's palace... instead of such clear words Jesus' last sentence for the imprisoned is:

Blessed is the one who does not take offence at me.

John was full of questions because Jesus had not turned out as he expected. And he could not cope with the challenges Jesus provided for his way of thinking.

And I must honestly say, I wonder whether and how we would cope...

Jesus' challenge is all about being honest and unselfish, it is about being positive, seeing the good possibilities in things, being people who bring light and hope and encouragement in the place of dark and despair, giving example of how to live together with differences that are not supposed to become divisions. We can all relate that to our own individual lives in our relationships with family and friends, neighbours and colleagues; and we can relate that too to the way we live together in this church and in God's world.

John was in prison, literally and spiritually, when he sent his anxious message to Jesus. We don't know whether the answer his disciples brought back released him from his anxiety or not.

But what we know is that Jesus Christ, the son of God, comes to release people. He releases us from our inner prisons of fear and meaninglessness, and shows us where to go!

May he come afresh to each one of us on our journey through Advent, through this season in which we prepare for and celebrate God's coming. It can transform the way we live. It can transform the world into a place where power is shared, and all have what they need, a world in which people can live in relationship, in celebration, in joy and in peace.

As we see the brokenness of our world, may we also see the unexpected chances of change and healing.

May this allow us to continue to work for justice and peace in our world – bearing John's questions in mind and affirming Jesus' answers by the way we choose to live: waiting and wondering, hoping and searching, and **making a difference**.

Amen.