

Sermon – Matthew 11: 2-11, Isaiah 35: 1-10, Magnificat

Advent 3

Sustain us O God, with the power of your love on our journey to meet the One who is coming. Amen.

This week, we found out that Greta Thunberg, a Swedish girl aged 16, was Time's Person of the Year. This high profile award is usually given out to world political leaders, mostly middle aged men, but this week it went to a young female activist who has created a new focus for climate action among the youth of the world and who has also managed to get onto some very high profile platforms to carry her message more broadly to the global community. Margaret Atwood has called her a modern-day Joan of Arc. Other people have called her prophetic.

Today's readings, in this our third week of Advent, continue the theme of preparation, but with a strong flavour of prophesy. In our Old Testament reading the Prophet Isaiah is talking at one level about the return of the Jewish people from exile, but at another level, he is talking about salvation. In the Magnificat, Mary, pregnant with Jesus, and also a young girl, is singing her praises to God and presenting a radical God who will upset the status quo. And in our Gospel reading today, Jesus is responding to John, who after baptizing him, seems unsure about what is going on. Jesus is not fitting into the Messianic mold that people were expecting and hoping for. These three readings provide us with outspoken messages of hope, and also challenge us, like Greta, in our understanding of world order, and how to prepare for His coming.

Well it was hard to pick which of these three texts to focus on for a ten minute sermon, so in the end I chose to look at all of them! Matthew, more than any other of the Gospel writers, uses Old Testament material – in fact more than twice as much as the others. In our reading today, we have echoes of Isaiah and a direct quote from Malachi. Matthew is writing at the time when the believers in Jesus are painfully breaking away from their Jewish origins. It seems as if he is trying to justify this new way by using the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible.

In response to the question from an imprisoned John the Baptist “Are you the one who is to come?”, Jesus replies in an echo of our reading from Isaiah:

“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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me”.

Why does Matthew pick out this text? If we look at the text from Isaiah, it’s about the saving power of God.

“Here is your God.... He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”

This text was written for the Israelites in exile, in Babylon, far from their ruined and beloved city of Jerusalem. It was written when the Israelites were at their lowest ebb, fragmented, broken, they couldn’t save themselves. Only God could save them.

And perhaps that is what Matthew is saying to us, when he presents Jesus as the Messiah, the one who will come to usher in a world of universal peace and joy.

And what about Mary? If John had doubts as he languished in prison, there is no doubt in Mary’s mind when she says: “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour”. And this wonderful eruption of faith is matched by the astonishing prophesy of worldly reversal, brought about by God.

“He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek;
He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he hath sent empty away.”

This prophetic outpouring foreshadows Jesus’ own declarations above and also in the Beatitudes, which become the major themes of his ministry to the marginalized and his

teaching of the good news. Jesus challenges the assumption that the way things are, is the way things have to be. Jesus offends those in power.

Jesus said “blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me”. What an invitation! We are all invited by Jesus to be part of the kingdom of heaven. We are all invited to travel along that highway, that holy way that Isaiah talks about, the highway to heaven. To be in heaven is to be with God forever in total joyous, unspoiled fellowship. And we are all invited to put God first and experience that everlasting joy, that salvation.

We have a choice. We can choose to follow the path of holiness where we put God first. Where we love our God with all our heart, and with all our mind and with all our soul and with all our strength. A path that claims love of God and neighbour, and joy in the presence of God and the hope of salvation despite all our human foibles and failings because we have been redeemed by Jesus Christ our Saviour.

So, how are you preparing for Jesus’ coming this Advent? Are you like John the Baptist in prison, questioning whether Jesus really is the Messiah? Are you like Mary, passionately declaring her love for our God? Or are you sitting in the tension of knowing and unknowing, and desperately hoping for a better world? We all make our own choices as to how we can participate in God’s Kingdom, hear and now, how we can make a positive impact on God’s creation. We all have our own particular God given gifts and blessings. What choices are you making to follow that highway, that holy way, to everlasting joy?