

## Readings for the Third Sunday of Advent

11<sup>th</sup> December 2022

### First Reading: Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. 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. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

### Second Reading: James 5:7-10

Be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

### Gospel: St Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to Jesus, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'

Jesus answered them, '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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare

your way before you.” Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.’

### **A Reflection for the Third Sunday of Advent**

Like many youngsters, when we were children, my sisters and I were sometimes asked what we were hoping to get for Christmas. One year, following a trip to a zoo, one sister and I said that the things we hoped for were a rhinoceros and a hippopotamus. We were keen to have a pet, but even at a tender age, we didn’t really expect to get these. However, come Christmas morning, there were a rhinoceros and a hippopotamus in our stockings – in the form of small plastic play animals – hopes fulfilled but perhaps not in the way we expected. And I wonder how much time our parents spent scouring toyshops to find these particular animals.

As I have said previously, Advent is a time of growing anticipation of the coming of Light. A time of expectation and hope. We anticipate the coming of the Messiah both as the child of Bethlehem and when he returns again in glory. But who and what exactly are we looking for as we await the coming of the Messiah? Will he or she fit our hopes and expectations? Will we even recognise him or her? These were important questions for the Jewish people at the time of Jesus and for the early church.

In last week’s Gospel reading, we heard of John the Baptist in the wilderness enthusiastically speaking of the one who would come after him. Immediately after that passage, we read of Jesus’ baptism by John, inaugurating the start of Jesus’ public ministry. But now, in today’s reading, John the Baptist is languishing in Herod’s prison and maybe the doubts are starting to creep in. Maybe John is starting to lose patience. John announced the Messiah as the one who would come to gather the wheat into his granary and who would burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. From what he hears, Jesus seems to be doing the gathering but John doesn’t see much fire. What is going on? So he sent his disciples to ask Jesus the question: ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’

In response, Jesus refers John back to Isaiah’s visions, part of which we have in our Old Testament reading today. What Isaiah prophesied is being fulfilled: ‘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’. Jesus emphasises to John’s disciples to report what they ‘hear and see’ – both they and John need to understand the new reality that Jesus is ushering in. It is something we need to understand too. Like the people of that time, we also have the choice of whether to recognise and understand the new reality of God’s kingdom, even though, like John, it might not quite match our expectations, or to turn away.

Jesus then goes on to speak to the crowds about John. Last week, we met John as the last in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. But here, as Jesus himself says, John is ‘more than a prophet’. He, John, is also a sign of God’s presence as the messenger who will ‘prepare the way of the Lord’, announcing the coming of God’s kingdom.

Last week’s Gospel contrasted John’s alternative lifestyle with that of the religious elite. Here, the comparisons that Jesus makes are with King Herod. Herod minted coins that depicted reeds and he dressed in the soft clothes of the rich and elite. He was a violent and fearsome man, no doubt, and he had imprisoned and would later murder John. The people have come to Jesus in the wilderness, as they did earlier to John the Baptist, looking for hope, looking for freedom from petty tyrants like Herod. The powerful of the world sought then, and continue to seek, to bend faith

in God to their own ends, either to destroy it or to cloak their own violence and exploitation in the language of divine will. But here, Jesus is saying of Herod and others like him, that ultimately he is just a flimsy reed in the wind or a pathetic figure in unsuitable clothes for what lies ahead, for God's kingdom.

For John, Jesus didn't quite fit his hopes and expectations. So Jesus sought to reassure both him and the crowd, but also to challenge them: this isn't more of the same.

This is also true for the church today. We often try to fit Jesus into who we want him to be: the friend who loves us, who guides and upholds us, but perhaps also the friend who doesn't challenge us too much. We need to recognise that the Jesus of the Gospels broke all the conventions. Yes, it is true he loves us. Yes, he gives us strength to face what life throws at us. But he is also radical and demands a response and change. He calls us to heal the sick, to care for the poor, the weak, and the oppressed.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus challenged the religious and political elite of their day. They challenged the unjust political and social structures and called for change, leading to confrontation with the powerful. And they also challenged ordinary people to have the ability and willingness to see and understand the world in new ways, to have the courage to speak out and act truthfully, to bring about change and transformation in society.

In my report to St Mary's AGM last week, I said that it seems to be our human nature to cling to the familiar, but change is necessary if we and others are to grow and flourish. Times of change are also times of opportunity: opportunity to let go of the things that hold us back and to give our energies to those that lead us forward.

This time last year, we were all still very much affected by covid restrictions and fearful of its impact on our Christmas celebrations. Whilst covid has not gone away, and some are still significantly affected, for many of us our lives now feel much more 'normal' and yet a bit different. We have come out of the pandemic into a world that also looks very different. Last December, the potential for increasing economic hardship was on the horizon, though its full extent was, and perhaps still is, in the future. But who would have imagined then that this year there would be a war raging in central Europe, or that the impacts of climate change would have been making themselves felt quite so significantly across the globe? Change is all around us, all the time, whether we wish for it or not. These examples are dreadful things to happen but, as we saw in the pandemic, good things can come from bad if we choose to make them happen.

Jesus lived in times of change and he was a radical, he took risks, and certainly he suffered for them, but he changed people's lives and their understanding of God. Two thousand years later, the church he founded is still here and he is still changing lives today. So, following his example, we should embrace change and turn it into an opportunity for new and better things to happen. Like John the Baptist, we are the messengers of the Kingdom of God today, with a message of hope.