

3rd Sunday of Advent (A)

11th December 2022

'Tell John what you hear and see ...'

Is 35: *the eyes of the blind shall be opened ... everlasting joy on their faces ...*

James 5: *be patient until the Lord's coming*

Mt 11: 2–11: John heard what Christ was doing. 'Are you the one who is to come?'

My first degree was in Natural Sciences, specializing in physics and, as was normal then, it was a straight 3 yrs. Every degree was in two parts, Part I and Part II; and for most degrees, including mine, Part I was 2 yrs, and Part II was 1 yr ('finals'). (So, not 'Part I, Part II and Part III' ... No, bizarrely 'Part III' was just for occasional Maths 4th yrs!) Confused??? Bear with me! OK, so then the 2-yr Part I was subdivided into Parts IA and IB (years 1 & 2). This may seem a strange way of dividing up the degree years, and ... well, it was normal to us!

But, in fact it's also a pretty useful way of thinking about Advent: part IA, part IB and part II, each about a third of a month long. Part I of Advent is that part before the 17th Dec, when we wait and ponder the prophecies of the 1st Coming, and our own wait for the 2nd Coming; and then part II is from Dec 17th (this Saturday onwards) when we'll make our final octave of preparations for Christmas. And

we can sort-of divide part I into two parts: part IA, whose key figure is Isaiah; part IB whose key figure is John the Baptist. (The key figures of part II, of course, will be Mary & Joseph: see next weekend!)

We began our entry into part IB last Sunday, with an overlap from Isaiah to John the Baptist, the baton handed over, so to speak, from part IA to part IB, as prophecy gave way to fulfilment: John's appearing in the wilderness bringing into reality the hopes of Israel expressed by Isaiah. But really it was with the change-over on weekday readings that we entered part IB: starting on Friday we started to hear of Christ speaking Himself about His forerunner, John, and extolling his virtues, and back-witnessing to John's importance as the one who had prepared the way for Himself. This theme will run through the weekdays right up to Friday, a full-on appreciation of John's significance, allowing us to appreciate Our Lord's own assessment of the need for John, his role, and his message of getting properly ready for Jesus. In these days we still get some beautiful texts from Isaiah (e.g. today's

1st Reading) and we still get told the need for patience & waiting (e.g. today's 2nd Reading from St James), but above all this week we are told: *listen to John the Baptist!*

Now, this second Sunday appearance of John the Baptist is called *Gaudete* Sunday, for the opening antiphon of this Mass is "*Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice.*" "Rejoice," that's the translation of the word "*Gaudete.*" Why do we rejoice, then? We rejoice, because Christmas is near: a fortnight away, the celebration of the birth of Our Saviour. Of course we rejoice ... Christmas is coming!

But, the text we get from Matthew's Gospel today is about *prison!* We're told to rejoice, but what we hear of is St John the Baptist's languishing in prison ... perhaps the last place you'd expect to rejoice. Even so, John, imprisoned by King Herod, can rejoice to know that the Messiah has come, that Jesus is Lord, and that His Kingdom is coming. Though, it seems he has to be sure. We might be surprised that John feels the need to check ... "*Are you the Christ?*" At the River Jordan, as he met and

welcomed and baptized Jesus, he was sure; when he sent away his own disciples to follow Jesus and no longer himself, he was sure; when he testified about Jesus, 'Behold, the Lamb of God,' he seemed very sure. But now? Now in prison, perhaps John has 'a wobble.' Locked away in Herod's dungeon, is John struggling with some doubts?

No, I don't actually think that this is the right reading of the text. We're jumping to conclusions that it is *John's* question for *John's* personal need. But maybe it's not: maybe it's not for his benefit at all, but for his *followers*! Perhaps the questions, "Has his ministry been a waste? Has all his preaching and baptizing and proclaiming the Messiah been mistaken?" are John's *disciples'* concerns, as they see him suffering, worried that he was wrong, and that Jesus is not the Messiah ... Maybe John recognised that they were somewhat locked into the Jewish Zealots' mind-set of expecting a more militant Messiah, one who would rout the Romans, cast out the occupiers. John sees that this is not what Jesus does. Jesus

approaches His ministry in a very different way, and John wants his followers to see that, and to do what he says, “*to follow Him now,*” to follow Jesus.

We too need to be convinced of the absolute truth of Jesus. Like St John the Baptist’s disciples, we may sometimes have our doubts, our ‘wobbles.’ Especially in times of particular suffering, we may be prone to ask the same question as they: ‘Why isn’t God acting in the way I would expect?’ / ‘Why isn’t Jesus more pro-active in the ways I would predict?’ We also need to receive a reply from Jesus, as they did.

Our Lord’s answer, to John the Baptist’s searching question, and to us this Advent, is a gentle answer, filled with the power of Jesus as Messiah, with plenty of evidence of His fulfilling the prophecies. Jesus refers to all His healing miracles, and to His preaching the Good News to the poor ... all in fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecies of the Messiah. “*Tell John what you hear and see,*” He tells the questioners. They would have been reassured to be reminded that so much of what is written in the Old

Testament about the ‘One to Come’ is truly happening here, in Jesus. They clearly needed that reassurance directly from Our Lord: they needed that reminder that the Lord first of all brings consolation and healing. He brings challenge and corrects error, too, but He first brings mercy and forgiveness. He takes pity on the poor and the weak, and binds up hearts that are broken.

It’s a beautiful reminder to us, too, as we listen in to the reply John received. The ‘One who Was to Come’ of old did indeed come. He came in poverty at Bethlehem; He lived in simplicity in Nazareth; He carried out His ministry as an itinerant preacher, not currying favour with the high and mighty. But He bestowed His divine concern, His healing love, and His merciful forgiveness on the ordinary people ... on us, in other words. We need have no fears that He is looking after us, if we stay close to Him. John in prison felt suddenly fearful of what his life held for him — or, at least, his followers did — but a single word from Our Lord put them at ease, helped their hearts to trust, even in the face of the persecution their beloved John was

experiencing and the martyrdom he was going to endure.

As we come closer to Christmas, and as we keep this *Gaudete* Sunday, let's put our total trust in Our Lord whose infinite concern is for each one of us, in our life's every need. In Advent, our joyful desire for Jesus needs to grow, to well up into a real longing for Him. Christmas should be a total celebration of God's having entered into our world, and our personal world; it's not just a historical remembrance of 2000yrs ago; it's something real and personal for me, now. Let's hear again those words with which Jesus ends His reply to John's question: "*Happy is the man who does not lose faith in Me.*"

Jesus, my Lord and Saviour, speak to me, now; strengthen me in weakness and doubts, and let me delight in Your coming amongst us: originally at Bethlehem, and now every day in the Church. Let me have that gentle joy of Advent, the assurance of Your coming to the world, ... and to me.