

Isaiah 35. 1 – 10
Matthew 11. 2 – 11

Fr Alex

Today is known as 'Gaudete' Sunday, Latin for 'rejoice!' In the midst of our Advent waiting we are encouraged to remember the joy that is to come so soon at Christmas. This is signified by a slight change in colour, from the darker, more sombre purple, to a lighter rose colour – you might say pink, but the Church definitely calls it rose..!

But I wonder how we can be authentically joyful today, rather than simply liturgically? There's a lot to dampen our joy at the moment, as we look around the world and all the troubles that seem to threaten us.

And although Christmas is such a joyful time, we know that it doesn't suddenly make everything better. After we have been reminded of the wonderful light shining in the darkness, we will inevitably begin to notice all that darkness again, all too soon. So what are we really waiting *for*, in Advent?

There's something of that in our Gospel reading today. We meet John the Baptist again, but this time in prison. It will not be long before he is murdered. And although John is hopefully expectant about the coming Messiah, he is cautious too, and full of questions. Is this really the One? Or do we have to keep waiting?

I'm reminded of a silly story about three polar bears, a mum, a dad, and a baby. The baby polar bear asks its mother, "mummy, am I a polar bear?" The mother answers, "well, I'm a polar bear, your daddy's a polar bear, so you're a polar bear too." And the young one says, "But why am I so cold, then?"

I think that's kind of what John the Baptist is asking of Jesus from his prison cell: if you *are* the Messiah, the promised one, the one we've all been waiting for; why am I in prison, then? Why isn't everything better?

Jesus is the fulfilment of all the promises of all the prophets, the one that God's people and indeed the whole earth has been waiting for, whether they know it or not; and yet we're still waiting for things to get better, for God's kingdom of justice and joy to be made known in the world.

But if that's how we feel then the question we need to ask ourselves in Advent is this: are we waiting for God to do something? Or are we waiting *with* him, ready to act when we see the signs of his kingdom?

Jesus is Emmanuel, "God *with* us;" not God doing stuff for us, or to us. But waiting with us in the dangers and darkness of the world.

So Advent is not about waiting for something to happen; it's about preparing ourselves to be ready for when we see the signs of the kingdom, so we can join in with what God is already doing to bring it about.

And we know what those signs are: Isaiah prophesied them in our first reading, and in the Gospel reading Jesus showed us how he was fulfilling them.

The signs to look out for are anything that challenges the expectations of this world; things that are turning upside down, as God's kingdom begins to break in. "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." Up is down and down is up.

The signs in our own times might not be so obvious, but they are no less topsy-turvy; and no less transformational.

In the desert of a self-centred and individualistic society, we can look for the flowers of generosity and self-sacrifice. When time and money are given in support of a cause; or an isolated person in need finds friendship and generosity from their neighbour.

In the thirsty ground of suspicion and hostility that characterises so much of the world, we can look for the springs of water that are the care and welcome of the stranger, and the outcast. When someone stops to talk to that homeless person on the street; when racism and bigotry are challenged, even at the risk of becoming unpopular.

In the wilderness of indifference and apathy in a world that seems to have turned its back on God, we can look for the stream of the Holy Spirit; the highway that leads to God. That conversation with a friend that leads to an invitation to church; an opportunity to talk about the difference that faith can make to life.

These are some of the signs of the coming kingdom that we can all see happening around us; and they are all things that we can join in with.

In all our waiting for the great big transformation that we so long for, we mustn't miss all the countless little transformations along the way. And if we stop and wait for something to happen, we can miss the truth that our waiting is only as long as we choose to make it.

God is constantly active in the world, and he chooses to work with us in bringing about the transformation that is his promise to us. In these remaining days of Advent, let us ensure that we are active too, prepared and ready to follow his lead.

What are the signs of his kingdom that we might notice around us, and join in with? Amen.