

### Susan's homily for Gaudete Sunday – Advent Three

Just before Christmas, what a sad story. Some people jump off the page in their humanity and surely John is one of those. Why are we thinking of him here before the birth of Jesus when he was only a few months older and a second cousin of Mary. Families were so important in their culture. How proud Mary's family must have been when Elizabeth married into a priestly family. Sadly, it wasn't to turn out well. Life doesn't always turn out how we expect it to. Mary was to have more than one in her family executed and here is John another. Many times, life just doesn't turn out how our experience makes us think it will. Last time I spoke about my father. This time I will introduce you to my father in law, William Cresswell. He was as medic in the second world war. He rarely talked about it. We do know the medics went on D-Day plus one. He never once said a word, but that beach must have been a hell on earth. Before they went, they had little nooks given them. (*show book of identifying German planes*). Much of life is just learning facts that help us live our lives. So it was with the plane book. No trouble, nothing much to really think about.

It was just the same for Jesus and John. They had plenty of facts to learn. Their culture was much more faith based than ours. They would have grown up knowing the scriptures, psalms and through that the history of their people and their relationship with their God. John was the son of a priest so his life would have been even more embedded in faith. Sons followed their fathers. It makes us wonder what John's family thought of him becoming an itinerant wandering preacher out in the dangerous wilderness.

In last Sunday's gospel reading, John the Baptist arrives to herald the beginning of Jesus' adult ministry. He is incredibly outspoken to the crowds who came to listen. Many in the crowd loved it. By today's reading, the folk in authority are getting tired of him and the uncomfortable truths he repeats. He is in prison. John had been watchful, faithful in preaching, courageous in baptising, fearless in opposing those who rejected his message. Had the prison conditions taken their toll? Even with him had an element of doubt crept in? John sends some of his remaining followers to see Jesus. We will never know what he really wanted. So much of our Bible is like this – we have to think about it deeply, and consider. Best not to rush over the story, but patiently think. Does he want Jesus to come and see him? Does he want him to use his influence to save him? That doesn't seem likely to me. Maybe he is resigned to his fate, and is wanting to know whether it is the time to hand his mission on? John has never been under any illusions about what he is. Nevertheless, he sees the value of his calling. He is the fore-runner, maybe he cannot relax until he knows his mission has been successful. So, he asks "are

you the one who is to come, or am I to wait for another?”

John's task has been to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah and that places him with all the prophets before him, in the age before the coming of the Kingdom. John urged the people to sort out their lives, stressing the possibility of Judgement when their God came among them. It is easy to see how John's enthusiasm had polished his hopes into the before Kingdom promises. We are all prone to sort our minds based on the facts we have learnt, and our life experience.

Some more of Richard's Dad. He was given these little books on how to conduct yourself whilst in Europe, and particularly Germany. A conquering army can be a difficult army to control. Not so cut and dry this time. Life experience will always affect the way people interact with each other.

It must have become obvious to everybody, including John, that when Jesus' ministry got going it was different to John's ideas. How we feel for John. No longer the voice thundering in the wilderness. Had he got it wrong? Being in that awful prison wouldn't have helped. What answer does Jesus give to the question? Jesus will be talking to the followers of John as much as talking to his cousin. He holds up the Isaiah prophecy as a check list. If these signs of the Kingdom are happening, then John can trust that Jesus is indeed the promised Saviour, even if his style of ministry is different.

So, what about us? Well, however we travel the pilgrimage of faith it is affected by what we have learnt, by our life experience and by how much time we spend on it. If John could be confused by Jesus taking his ministry forward from what they had learnt as children, then as sure as eggs is eggs, we can be. We don't know but, in my bones, I feel John would have received Jesus' message, and understood it. His mind would have been opened to all he had seen and heard. How lucky are we to have heard the same stories and the same message. It's as well we too keep an open mind. Hold on to what scripture tells us. Be alert and ready to see.

In Advent, let us take our time getting to the fun and glitz of the season. Now is the time for patience, We haven't read James today, but if we had he would be reminding us to take our time, As the “early and late rains” fall on us, we will begin to grow into the coming Kingdom. There is nothing to fear. The passage from Isaiah sets before us a time with an absence of fear and of healing. There is no distinction in the work of God, he both brings into being and puts things right. The message is clear – keep alert, be patient and keep an open mind for the great expectations of God will be fulfilled. What's more, far in excess of anything we might imagine or learn from our life experience. The Kingdom will be entirely in keeping with the nature of God, which is **love**.

What of William? He had the facts – he had the book on how to behave. No matter what was going on around him when he was living in Germany in 1946 helping to restore, he made German friends as well as his comrades. The people who he was billeted with and he kept in touch for years He took himself to a place beyond what was asked in the book and beyond what his life experience may have told him. I've used this ornament before, but this Advent let us make it our watchword, because Love is what it's all about.

Amen.