

Sunday Thought

11th December 2022 Third Sunday of Advent

Readings

Isaiah 35: 1 - 10
Psalm 146: 5 - 10
James 5: 7 - 10
Matthew 11: 2 - 11



Christmas Surprise

I have heard it said increasingly over recent years, *'I wish we could drop the custom of giving everybody a gift at Christmas!'* and sometimes the question, *'Why do we give gifts at Christmas?'* The ensuing discussion goes something like this: *'We often give people the gifts they ask for, which is easier than having to do all that head-scratching about what can I possibly give her this year?!'* *'Gifts can be embarrassing in terms of value, and at times even become competitive!'* *'It is wonderful to witness the recipient of a special, beautifully wrapped gift, overcome by unexpected, spontaneity, expressing the real joy of Christmas gratitude and love. I hope I have misjudged the social climate and I know there are many moments of extremely joyous excitement in lifting a parcel from beneath a spangled fir tree – For Me? And who would really want to lose the excitement of little children pre-dawn on Christmas Day?'*

With that in mind, Jesus' words to followers of John the Baptist gave me today's *Thought* – *'When you went out to see John in the desert and by the Jordan, What did you expect?'* This gospel reading rather like a post-Nativity inquest, nearly thirty years after the event. John's preaching and baptisms took place beyond Jericho and not so far from King Herod's summer palace. The King's attention would, of course have been drawn by mixed crowds of the 'religious' – *Pharisees and Saducees* – synagogue leaders and everyday folk from all across Judaea and the Jordan Valley. They were ready for new things, for religious revival, for prophetic fulfillment and changes in their social and political scene. Herod had had interviews and conversations with John. He was far from pleased with the camel-haired contemporary prophet whose words, like those of his long ago predecessors were challenging life and religious commitments right at the very roots. John had now laid down a further personal challenge with his criticism of Herod's marriage to his brother's wife! The result? John was now in Herod's prison at Fort Macchereus on the eastern coast of the Dead Sea.

Naturally, many of John's hearers and followers were questioning his claims of the coming Messiah and the new reign about to begin. John himself, who no doubt had had endless conversations with Jesus about these times, was questioning his own vocation. From prison he sent disciples to ask Jesus' views - *'Have we made a mistake? Got it all wrong?'*

Without doubt he would refer to Isaisah's words from today's scripture. *'Where is the splendour and glory of the true King? Where are the people of God regaining strength to overcome the armies of their enemies? Where are those armies of God, marching in righteousness to drive back evil. Herod may have established fruitful orchards and fields on the edge of deserts around his palaces. But is this it? Is this all?' Surely Isaiah promised more!*

Jesus sent a reply. It would be founded on conversations he had shared with John probably at Passover visits to Jerusalem. *'Tell John to remember the whole of Isaiah's message from my Father. He promised us far greater gifts than powerful armies, wise judges, lush pastures and rich olive groves. He promised sight for the blind, mobility for the lame, hungry people satisfied ... minds refreshed. Look around you! It's happening all about you -Tell John the Kingdom of God is here. To the crowd who heard this Jesus said 'John **is** the forerunner you expected!'. He may seem like 'failure' to you, but he is the greatest, most privileged man to to live at this time and to be called by God as worthy to introduce the Christ to His world. Listen to his words. And listen again to Isaiah - At the heart of a new world of new lives runs a 'Way of Holiness' along which every step, every sinless, loving gift from the humblest person who has faith, is building The Kingdom of Peace and Love and Truth. That is his word to the church today.*

There are many, many thoughts jumping out of today's scriptures, but I pause at James' - *'Be patient and prayerful along the Way of faith and love, of hope and holy living. Be ready for when Jesus comes again in splendour to fully establish his glorious kingdom. The whole gift of Christmas. IT'S JESUS!*

Our place today is to be like the small child waiting, restless, impatient, trusting through Christmas night. The Day of Jesus' coming will be an awakening to meet him in all his majesty and love, striding through all lands, leading his redeemed people along the way of holiness. We shall wake to see more of Himself in Glory.



An Advent Prayer

Lord, Advent is the time of promises
You promised Joy and flooded Bethlehem fields with angel choirs.
You promised Peace and gave Jesus the reconciling Cross of sacrifice.
You promised Love and gave us yourself.
We give you and your world, our lives with all our love at Christmas and for ever.

www.friendshipfiles.com/sunday-thought

A Happy Christmas and Thank You Readers

The Editor believes this is the appropriate time to conclude these 'Pandemic Season' Sunday Thoughts and leaves you praying for Jesus' gifts of love, peace, and joy.

If you wish to read more there are further meditations on the website, especially on the **'In His Office'** page If you do not have access and wish to have printed copy, please let me know.