

Advent III 2025 (Year A)

Isaiah 35: 1-6. 10; Ps 145; James 5:7-10; Matt 11:2-11

I love Christmas, despite rumours to the contrary! it is a time of wonderful colours and smells and sights and lovely associations. It can be a time of sadness too. For some people it is a time when the memories of deceased or separated family members who are no longer at their dining table. Or friends who no longer gather for a pre-Christmas drink. Others are suffering from ailments or trauma. Looking around the world, it would be easy to despair, with war, famine, drug abuse, civil unrest, and the loss of anything approaching a moral frame-work. It can feel like looking off an immense precipice. And people say, *'Christmas is a nice story, but where is God.'* I will eat, and drink, and make merry, to cover my fear, and let my laughter go no deeper than my lips. 'Where is your God?' My answer will be to avoid their eyes and drink my martini. Then, the tinsel and baubles and wrapping paper, are all bundled away. The world has not changed at all except that we are little heavier around the middle and a little lighter in the wallet. We all say 'that was great', lets do it again next year. And the world spins on.

I want to do something new.

Take a moment to remember. In what seems ages ago, when Herod was Tetrarch - King by the authority of the Roman Emperor - John the Baptist was arrested because of the words he spoke about the presence of God and the coming of God's anointed one, and His call to the people to put their affairs in good order; that is to say to repent.

John, was a prophet, after a long line of prophets, saying pretty much the same thing in roughly the same annoying way: Moses, Abraham, Zechariah, Jeremiah, Ezra. Nothing much has changed. At times people recollected themselves when God spoke to them and then they slipped back into their old ways, usually within a generation. Armies marched across the earth, changing the shape of empires and nations. People continued to marry, bring up children, try to make a living, cheat one another and drink and eat whatever they could, and depending on how things were going or what they wanted, sacrifice a sheep or an ox or a human child to make the heavenly powers happy. Then something different did happen, and we are back with John in today's Gospel:

'When John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?''¹

John is in prison, because he speaks what God tells him to speak, that is the truth. John is speaking on behalf of all those who are in prison for the same reason, even in our own day. He is speaking on behalf of all those prophets that came before him: he is on the edge of the cliff, stepping out...

Now, Jesus speaks to the crowd about this *John*, *'What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?'* No that is for seekers of comfort, where you can close the doors of your house and shelter yourself. Jesus continues, *"What then, did you go out to see? A Prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.'* John is a real prophet, not a reed that shakes before the wind of public opinion and fashion. And what John prophesises is one greater than he. One who also steps into the

¹ Matt: 1:1-3

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wilderness. It is the wilderness of the world without God until the end of time. The wilderness of Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Melbourne and Castle Donington as well as the tunnels of Gaza, the battle fields of the Ukraine, and the desolated villages of Somalia.

He did not come to impose peace. He came to ask us to accept Him in trust, built on the ancient witness of his faithful. He came to break the cycle of despair and hell on earth, no matter how comfortable that hell might appear to be. He came to do battle with sin. Now hear what the prophet Issiah sings:

*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.*

...

*They shall see the glory of the LORD,
The majesty of our God.²*

Here, inside, is the desert. Jesus is the blossoming within it. This is the meaning of Christmas in the LORDS walk towards Easter. And this is how we see it manifested in the world: When someone who lives in the wilderness with us picks up the Christ Child, recognises Him and takes Him into his or her life we see the Kingdom. This is my response to those who cannot see him in world around them: *He did not come to make it better by a wave of the hand; he came willingly to suffer in the world alongside us and to lift our hearts upwards, until we are ready to live with Him in heaven.*

Allow this, and you will never have the same Christmas again. All the lights and smells and sounds suddenly become richer and more meaningful, and there is less place for sorrow.

² 35: 1-2