

Third Sunday of Advent
Fr Jonathan Jong

Matthew 11:2-11

Isaiah 35:1-6, 10

James 5:7-10

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice.
Indeed, the Lord is near.*

Words from the traditional entrance antiphon,
from St Paul's epistle to the Philippians, the
fourth chapter.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and
of the Holy Spirit.

Not so long ago, last week, many centuries past—
in the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor
Tiberius when Pontius Pilate was governor of
Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and
Annas and Caiaphas were high priests—John,
the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, was in the
wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. No
reed shaking in the wind, was he, nor decked in
soft kings' raiment, but a prophet sent to face us.

And today he is told, from behind bars awaiting a puppet despot's petty vengeance, he is told of the blind seeing, the lame walking, the deaf hearing, lepers cleansed, the dead alive, all good news. He will see confirmation of none of these things, not with his own eyes, our crotchety old faithful old John the Baptizer, none greater than whom has been conceived and born of a woman.

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It is the Third Sunday of Advent. And we are told to *rejoice*, thus the traditional name for this day in the Church's year: Gaudete Sunday, from St Paul's letter to the Philippians. And we are even given a reason so to do: *The Lord is near*, St Paul says. Near: a word, which like the word advent connotes both approach and arrival. In the same breath: presence and promise. The Lord is near. Nearer now than when we first believed. Not that this is particularly helpful to John the Baptist, languishing in a cell, or Paul, himself under custody and eventually also put to the sword.

The blind see, he told them to say to John, the lame walk, the deaf hear, but of course, they don't. And the poor may have good news

preached at them, but the World Health Organisation says that there are nearly 800 million people who cannot afford to keep themselves nourished. 3.1 million children die ever year from malnutrition. That's 8,500 kids a day. 350 an hour. 60 in the time it takes to preach this sermon.

Shall we look for another?, John asks, not knowing whether he dares to be hopeful. It's not a silly question, even now. *Be patient*, St James says, *be patient for the coming of the Lord*. But the Lord sure is taking his time. See, this is the why we need the Old Testament. Our forebears, they knew the importance of lament, they knew the place of *impatience*, of asking "How long, O Lord? How long?" Job 7; Psalm 13 and 35 and 89 and 90, I could go on; Habakkuk 1; pretty much all of Jeremiah. The call to be patient is all too often heard, even if not meant, as permission to accept the status quo, no matter how intolerable it is. This is, of course, not what St James means, who tells us to make the prophets our examples of this patience. Anyone who confuses what the prophets did for passive resignation hasn't read them very well.

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*Now it is time to awake out of sleep,
For the night is far spent and the day is at hand.*
These are the words I associate most with Advent, which we say every morning in our common prayer, taken from St Paul's epistle to the Romans, this one incidentally not written in prison. They are for me a daily reminder of what it means for Advent to be a season of anticipation. Waiting, Christianly conceived, is not a passive act. Rather, we are called in this time to prepare, to make ready the path of the coming King. Saints, you will recall, are not just characters in pious stories or subjects for artistic endeavours, but examples for us now: this includes John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul, martyrs both, who spoke truth to power.

There is another common misconception, not helped by off-the-cuff quips by clerics, that one Sunday of Lent and Advent each—them of these pink vestments—are to provide reprieve from these otherwise penitential seasons. This is a mistake not only because Advent isn't a penitential season in the way that Lent is, but also because liturgical seasons don't come with

bathroom breaks. Gaudete Sunday is not a suspension of Advent, but an amplification thereof: our anticipation is heightened today as we are given a foretaste of what is to come. We see, even if through a glass darkly, the world for which we are preparing, to which we are paving the way. A world in which the desert shall rejoice and blossom; the ransom of the Lord shall return; sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

So, there is work to be done. *Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.* We have our marching orders, and we should not pretend that we don't. We have, most of us, been through enough Advents and Christmases to expect sermons about making the world a better place. We should not pretend that we haven't. Nobody really needs another December tirade from this pulpit about the excesses of consumer capitalism. Tirades, by the way, that are, of course, hypocritical, given that none of the clerics here are anchorites. All the same, there is work to be done, by you and me, by us all. It is the Third Sunday of Advent, and if today we anticipate the coming of God's kingdom more intensely, then this is as good a week as any to participate more actively, practically, actually in Christ's advent.

As the white of Christmas breaks into the violet of this season, it ought not be rose-tinted glasses that we receive, but a fragrance to be offered: to be offered back to God, of course, but if the New Testament is anything to go by (and it should be), what that looks like is an offering to those in need. The blind, the deaf, the lame, the poor; the homeless and malnourished; the imprisoned, and those who need second chances and thirds and then some.

Maybe you don't know where to start. You will not be surprised to hear that I have specific opinions on the matter, but we can have that conversation later. For now: start anywhere. Start here, talking to each other about what you can do. Start just outside the church, where people sleep rough, and could do with a hot drink and a kind word. Start down the road, at the Gatehouse, who have called for warm hats and scarves and socks for gifts to the homeless. They need them by this Wednesday. Start with a standing order to a charity that supplies clean water and medical treatment to those who lack easy access. Start with a letter to your MP about what we can do together as a society to make this place look more, even if just a little more, like the

glimpse we get to see of a world in which all things are put to right. Wherever you start: the Lord is near.

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+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.