

Advent 3 – An alternative vision

Read [Isaiah 35:1-10](#), [Luke 1:46-55](#) [Matthew 11:2-11](#)

The advertising spin at this time of year often paints Christmas as a joyful family time with excited children opening presents and everyone getting on well together. The message is clear ... if you want to be happy ... then go and spend money on extravagant gifts for that's what celebrating Christmas is all about ... watch this ad to see how twisted the story can become ... in this ironic parody of the Christmas story (YouTube clip of Mulberry miracle ...)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLmwZjtbHZQ>

One of the reasons for the confused message may be that Christians have focused the Christmas message so tightly on the birth of a baby that we don't hear or share the much bigger and broader message of Advent. You see, it's much safer to just think about the joy of a newborn baby. Babies are an amazing gift ... but they grow up and become their own people.

The Advent message asks us to consider not just the **birth** of the Messiah – or **king** – but the coming of **God's kingdom** ... the alternative vision that Jesus has come to share and introduce ... where there is a reversal of the world's priorities and powers, and a new focus on the needs of the poor and hungry ... this is the good news of Mary's song and the hope of the Isaiah vision where nature itself rejoices, the desert blooms with life, where blind eyes are opened, and there is singing and joy! More on this in a moment ...

Living with doubt and disappointment ...

Lots of people don't grasp this vision, even great heroes of the faith like John the Baptist. Today's reading from Matthew's Gospel shows John having severe doubts about Jesus.

- Where was the fiery preaching he expected?
- Was Jesus really God's Messiah after all?
- And the thought, perhaps, 'How did I get it all so wrong?'

But what this shows us is that even people with strong faith – like John – can still go through seasons of doubt and disappointment.

Before we get to Jesus' reply, it's important to acknowledge that we all face doubts and disappointments in our faith at some stage. We'd like to think that our faith would shield us, but this isn't always the case.

Likewise there are all sorts of disappointments with governments around the world at the moment. I read an article on the ABC website just this week that described the rising level of unrest in so many countries (**slide**) – from impeaching the President of the US for corruption, to unrest in places from Bolivia to Egypt, to growing dissatisfaction with our Australian government over its unwillingness to tackle climate change that is making droughts and bushfires far more dangerous, and its cruel policies towards the most vulnerable. Like John, we may be having doubts about our openly Christian Prime Minister who doesn't seem to following Christian values.

The kingdom Jesus brings ...

While doubt and disappointment are part of life, including the life of faith, they are not the only word or the final word. Jesus sends his own message back to John to address some of his doubts (**slide**) – tell John what you see and hear – the blind are seeing again, the lame are walking, social outcasts like lepers are being restored to community and poor people are hearing that God loves even them. These signs may not be the fierce preaching that you were expecting, John, but – for those with eyes to see – they are signs pointing to God's kingdom breaking in – code for God's goodness and love coming into their midst in tangible ways.

The sorts of things Jesus reports echo the prophetic hopes for the arrival of the Messianic age – at least as described in Isaiah. Whether these hopes were thought of in figurative or literal ways, through the ministry of Jesus people are being healed and restored and loved.

In effect, Jesus tells John that **this** is what it looks like when **God** is reigning as King, as opposed to other rulers who rule through fear and violence. The forgotten people, the ordinary people, are being cared for and loved. This is a time for **blessing** rather than the judgment John was expecting – although there is plenty of material in Matthew's Gospel to suggest that God's justice is still on the agenda – but comes at some future time.

Mary's song – called the **Magnificat** – says much the same (**slide**). God will somehow bring about a reversal in the political and social order – the strong and powerful –

like King Herod and even Caesar – will be thrown down and the weak and lowly will be lifted up. The term used for the lowly could be translated as the poor or those of no account – the nobodies of the world. **Image.** Mary sings of all this in the past tense – as though it has already been accomplished. Mary is so sure that God will one day make this happen that it fills her with joy and praise – although the current world order appears to be still firmly in place.

Daring to dream and live with joy

Mary's attitude contrasts that of John. Both faced disappointment and had cause to doubt God – John in pondering whether his whole ministry had been a waste of time and Mary in thinking that her future was now under threat as an unwed mother.

John – as we can well sympathise – was focusing on his own predicament as a prisoner of the untrustworthy King Herod and began to question why Jesus wasn't fighting to release political prisoners like him – which was apparently part of Jesus' mission according to his preaching. It probably seemed to John that the strong and mighty of the world – the King Herods – were still firmly in control and nothing had changed.

By contrast, Mary seems to have been able to look **beyond** her personal situation to what **God** was doing for the whole world. (**Image**). Mary dared to dream that the world could be changed, that the renewal of God's people and even creation as envisaged by Isaiah could become a reality. It made her strong rather than fearful. And so, in the words of C. S. Lewis, she is **surprised by joy**. Her circumstances remained difficult – but she catches a glimpse of God's purposes and suddenly feels that – **yes** – God can do this. She had caught a glimpse of what God was inspiring ... and this made all the difference.

We too have a decision to make – like Mary and John – or an attitude to live by. This Christmas we can remember the birth of a baby and think there is nothing more we need do ... so let's eat, drink and be merry.

Alternatively we can grasp the message of Advent and look beyond the baby to the person and the message of Jesus – and choose to pursue his vision for a more just and inclusive world that doesn't reward the already rich and powerful but rather works to bring God's blessing and God's justice to the poor and the nobodies ... to hungry people like the homeless and unemployed in our midst, to those struggling

with addiction, to vulnerable people like asylum seekers, to poor people affected by rising sea levels and other effects of climate change.

I want to close with a Benedictine blessing ...

May God bless us with holy anger
at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
so that we may tirelessly work for
justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless us with the gift of tears to shed
with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation,
or the loss of all that they cherish, so that we may
reach out our hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless us with enough foolishness
to believe that we really can make a difference in this world,
so that we are able, with God's grace,
to do what others claim cannot be done.