

We are called to see and tell that Jesus loves us all

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Advent 3 A –Isa 35 1-10, Mt 11 2-11. Baptism of Sasha Obi

Sustain us, O God, with the power of your love on our journey to meet the One who is coming.

Our collect prayer and scriptures speak of a journey we're on to meet Jesus who's coming to us. Isaiah ^{35.8} says we're on a highway called the Holy Way. James ^{5.8} says *the coming of the Lord is near*. And the Gospel ^(quoting Mal 3.1 in Matt 11.10) speaks of John preparing our way for that journey.

So today, we're on a journey with little Sasha to meet Jesus. He's coming from the other direction to meet us. But Sasha will find, as we have found, that he's also walking alongside us. We don't ever travel the journey alone. If we fell and couldn't go on, the One who's walking with us would help us carry on and meet the One who's coming. It's tricky, but lovely, isn't it. In Advent, we think about what that companionship and that journey are like. On this 3rd Sunday in Advent, we think about it with the example of John the Baptist to learn from.

John's life was shaped by the way he understood his journey to meet Jesus. And that understanding was shaped by the way he read the prophets. For John, the prophets said wrath and judgment would clear away evildoers. And then blessings would come to the faithful remnant. So John – a prophet himself, also preached that judgement preceded blessing. And he preached it without fear or favour. Remember his confronting words to religious leaders; *You brood of vipers! Who warned*

you to flee from the wrath to come?

Today, we meet John after he's taken this to another level. He's confronted the ruler Herod Antipas over his irregular marriage to his sister-in-law. You don't get off lightly if you do that, so today we meet John in prison. There, he has time to ponder his life-long understanding of the coming Reign of God.

In his prison cell, John hears stories about the ministry of 'Jesus the Messiah' – the one he baptised; the one he said was *the One who is to come*. But apparently there's been no final judgement yet. This makes no sense! *Can he be the One?*

John sends some of *his own disciples* to ask Jesus: ³ *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*

⁴ *Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.'* Matt 11.4 – referring to the prophecy in Isaiah 35.5-6

John believed he'd been sent by God to call people to repent so they'd be fit to survive a fiery judgement. That was how he understood his vocation to prepare the way for the Reign of God.

But the message Jesus sent him effectively said the Reign of God had already arrived, and without the judgement. This left John confused. How can the blessing of citizenship in God's Kingdom be given before it's even been established who deserves to belong? How can the immutable sequence of justice before reward suddenly get subverted like that?!

For John himself – in his preaching and baptising work – nothing much had really changed after his meeting with Jesus down at the Jordan River. John had kept on proclaiming the fiery judgement that he'd been preaching all along. He didn't

seem to register the fact that Jesus was doing something totally different.

The point of meeting Jesus is that it challenges us to become disciples of Jesus. But John the Baptist met Jesus, and he didn't become his disciple. He kept on preaching fire and brimstone. He missed the astonishing fact that while we people were not yet good enough, Jesus shared all the blessings of God's Realm with us. John didn't get/understand blessings without judgement; didn't get Grace – which is forgiveness and inclusion before an apology has even been thought of. How could John have missed this; John of all people. It's a tragedy. It's as sad as Moses seeing the Promised Land to which he'd led God's people, but never entering it himself. (Deut

34)

In prison, John sounds like someone who's thinking about joining a church, but waiting 'till he finds one that's good enough. We mustn't get into that prison with him.

The Gospel is this: God didn't wait until we were good enough before blessing us in Jesus. We must return the compliment: we mustn't get ourselves so tied up in our preconceptions that we can't accept the call of Jesus. Ours is a gospel of Grace, not perfectionism. Love is our rule, not safety. We are not called to an obsessive fixation on other people's worthiness – or our own. We are called to see and tell that Jesus loves us all already. Transformation is needed, sure. But it's his love that does that transforming through the Holy Spirit's work in our lives.

We're on the way with Sasha to meet a special person – a wonderful person – our Lord Jesus. When we look back on our own lives, we'll see that Jesus has travelled the whole way with us. He was beside us even before we knew about him. That's a joy we can share with Sasha and with anyone else who needs to know it.

God... open blind eyes to the dawning of your kingdom, so that

*our hearts may rejoice as we behold the majesty of our
God.*

Collect prayer – Advent 3A