

Sermon Notes

**St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville**

Advent 3

Preacher

16 December 2007

**The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector**

Readings: Isaiah 35. 1-10; Song of Mary; James 5. 7-10; Matthew 11. 2-11

Are you the one?

Is there a more poignant communication in the New Testament than John's message from prison: "Art Thou the One who is to come, or wait we for another?" James Alison says, "here is a heart stretched towards a fulfillment that is not of his making, and in the face of which he is vulnerable to a sense of shame, loss and futility. Given what he is undergoing, how can he be sure that he was even pointing in the direction of God's breaking in? Will this One vindicate him against the enemy who holds him in a dungeon? Even he runs the risk of being scandalized by Jesus.

"The presence of the One who is coming in had been vastly easier to talk about when its time was not yet at hand. And yet now, as it comes in, the presence is very unlike how John, as all the prophets before him, had imagined him. The Presence becomes much more difficult to identify as it draws closer to us in time and place. Shouldn't the criteria be clearer? Shouldn't it be more obvious that the One who comes in will recompense his faithful ones and wreak vengeance on evil doers?"¹

Only last week we heard in the Gospel reading that John had announced that someone was coming who would bring fiery judgement, pitchfork in hand and axe for the trees. In so doing John is only being faithful to the message of the prophets in whose footsteps he stands. Isaiah in today's O.T. passage, in the midst of his evocative description of renewal and restoration also speaks of God coming in vengeance and with divine retribution. So often that was taken to mean punishment and justice of retributive kind – with undercurrents of revenge and violence. We need to be constantly reminded that the Hebrew word for vengeance originally meant to restore things to their proper state, for everything to be in harmony. It is restorative justice for as Jesus so clearly demonstrates God has nothing to do with violence, never has, never will. Little wonder John asks the question – is Jesus who he thought he was back at the time of his baptism?

The way Matthew tells the story there is no mistake: Jesus is that coming one. The baptism makes that unambiguous. But this creates a problem in the story. We have heard much between Matthew 3 and Matthew 11, but where is the pitchfork? Where is the fire? So it makes good sense that John sends his disciples with a 'Please explain!'

Matthew has no doubt about it. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. He reminds us of that in the opening verse of our passage: John heard about 'the deeds of the Christ'. If we had been sitting listening to Matthew's account, we would know exactly what he meant. Matthew has given us an account of Jesus' words in 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount, and constructed a summary of Jesus' deeds in 8-9, surrounding them neatly by the same summary statement in 4:23 and 9:35. "Jesus went around all the villages and towns, teaching in the synagogues preaching the Good News about the Kingdom. He healed people with every kind of disease and sickness." When, in the story, Jesus tells John's disciples to go and tell what they have heard and seen (11:4), the list summarises these deeds (11:5). But John doesn't have the benefit of seeing Jesus in the light of Good Friday and Easter – he is in prison, things aren't quite going as one might expect if the One who is coming is indeed present in this Jesus.

Our Lord replies in two ways. First he replies to John. He knows it would be unfair to give John a personal guarantee – to say "I really am who you thought – trust me" for that would merely leave John agonizing over his own ability to trust another human. So Jesus points towards something

objective, something that is manifest: the signs of the One coming in – the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking and so on. It's the whole Isaiah package. The signs being given are those of the Creator breaking in to fulfill his creation, which is what the promised redemption was all about. John's heart, stretched beyond parchedness can rest on this knowledge – can be satisfied, for to the heart attuned to the One who is expected, a prophet's heart, a sign of the creative work of God being made manifest is already the greatest refreshment that can be given.

The good news which the prophet and the prophet to come is to announce is good news for the poor and destitute, the broken hearted and downtrodden, the captives and oppressed. Its vista includes scenes of feasting on Mt Zion, of peace-making among the nations, of gathering of peoples from east and west, of fellowship in hearing and obeying God's Law, of healing and restoration. Jesus not only upheld this vision as the hope of the kingdom, of what will happen when God reigns, but also took it as an agenda for the here and now and declared that it was indeed beginning to operate in his ministry through the Spirit. Its most enduring element, the meal, became a central symbol and point of realisation, as people found there the controversial inclusiveness of Jesus' ministry. It lives on in the Eucharist. The One place, the one table at which all are welcome. (Full stop no qualifications!). A message some churches still finding hard to have accepted as is shown by the following story.

2 or 3 years ago The United Church of Christ in the USA wanted to spread a message of respect and inclusion for all. So they prepared an ad which the US mainstream media said was too "controversial" to air.

In an effort to break through the commercial clutter that clogs the arteries of broadcast and cable television, the UCC ad features an arresting image: a pair of muscle-bound bouncers standing in front of a church and telling some people they can attend while turning others away.

After people of color, a disabled man and a pair of men who might be gay are turned away, No, not you. I don't think so. No, no way! the image dissolves to a text statement that: "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we."

Then, as images of diverse couples and families appear on screen, an announcer explains that, "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

It is a graceful commercial, which delivers an important message gently yet effectively – something that cannot be said of most television advertising these days. But viewers of the ABC, CBS and NBC television networks couldn't see it because, in this age of heightened focus on so-called "moral values," quoting Jesus on the issue of inclusion is deemed to be "too controversial."

What was controversial? Apparently, the networks don't like the ad's implication that the Nazarene's welcome to all people might actually include ALL people.

Noting that the image of one woman putting her arm around another was included in the ad, CBS announced, "Because the commercial touches on the exclusion of gay couples and other minority groups by other individuals and organizations, and the fact the Executive Branch has recently proposed a constitutional amendment to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman, this spot is unacceptable for broadcast on the (CBS and UPN) networks."

NBC was similarly concerned that the spot was "controversial."

One wonders whether a similar ad might not get the same response here in Australia.

We need to be careful that we do not give out the message, however subtly that some people are not fully part of society or church. Not really acceptable. But rather to clearly stand with and for any who might be marginalized, ostracized for whatever reason.

We are helped to do that as we get in touch with our own experience of God's transforming grace in our lives. For it is as we know ourselves to be loved and experience something of the good news which Jesus ministry is all about as mentioned above - good news because of the transformation,

healing and freedom it brings– as we realize how much we have been blessed we are then opened to offer the same generous, compassionate acceptance and friendship to others. We are freed from the need to be fearful, closed off, in rivalry with others – for we know we are safe and that frees us to be truly present and open to others.

The experience I am talking about is eloquently illustrated in what I was recently told by a parishioner. Speaking of a time when the person had been facing surgery in hospital and prepped early in morning and then kept waiting all day. Through time of waiting quite calm, so much so that others remarked on this and asked, How come? They said “I knew God was there and the thought came I can’t lose. If things go well and the op is successful then God is with me and I am Ok. If things don’t go well and don’t come through the Op then I’m with God, and so I’m Ok. I can’t lose. So what might have been a stressful time of waiting became a time of quiet serenity. A serenity which that person continues to exude in a way that is quietly, yet powerfully inspirational.

That from one of our amazing senior members, all of whom are such a wonderful source of inspiration and wisdom. So don’t be shy about letting others see and know about your experience of God’s presence and grace – your experience of the breaking in of the creative work of God – it is the equivalent today of the evidence Jesus points John to – evidence that people need to see and hear so that they can be convinced that He who is to come has indeed come in the One whose birth we prepare to celebrate in 9 days time, that we do not wait for another but can put our trust and hope in the One who shows God to be Immanuel, God with us, never over against us. Blessed be God.

¹ ‘A Stretching Fulfilment’ meditation for 3rd Sunday in Advent year A from James Alison’s *Advent and Christmas Lectionary Meditations* at <http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/texts/eng51.html>