

It's True, and We'll Show You

Third Sunday of Advent, Year A, 11 December 2022

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Coddell

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

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

There's the most profound list of human hopes and dreams in our Isaiah reading today—and, remarkably, the most topical. There's the promise of good news, of breakthroughs, for people in the grip of anxieties, for those living with disabilities, for the displaced and the outplaced who are desperate to find their way, and for the ransomed who're returning home—here I think of those prisoner exchanges we're seeing on the news, as young Russian and Ukrainian prisoners of war get to go home, and I think of Sean Turnell safely back in Australia from his Myanmar prison. Isaiah knows the singing, the dancing and the joy that will follow.

And there's not just good news for humans to be had, but for the whole created order. In Isaiah today the environment joins in the general mood of rejoicing—the wilderness is gladdened, the desert rejoices and blossoms, and even the crocus joins the singing. Here's a grand cosmic vision of renewal and hope from Isaiah leaving out nothing of significance for humans and for their world.

Friends, the good news for we Christians in this Advent Eucharist is that all this isn't just wishful thinking or pie in the sky, because these outcomes have happened already and they're still happening. Mary represents faithful, patient Israel in whose womb the long-awaited breakout of joy and hope takes living form. Jesus Christ is the one who will unseat the rule of bullies and put the powers that run this world on notice, as Mary sings in her Magnificat—a teenage girl in whom the whole of humanity's hopes and dreams receive a resounding 'yes' from God.

Of course, many are rightly sceptical that anything can ultimately change, that justice might actually prevail, that life's horrors can be brought to heel, or simply that their own personal hurts and disappointments will ever loosen their grip. Even John the Baptist had his doubts, according to today's Gospel. Is this Jesus the one who is to come, the longed-for deliverer of Israel, or should we look for someone else? And the answer is yes! It is him! The old covenant signs are actually breaking out, like those we hear from Isaiah this morning—the disabled are being loved into a new way of being, the victims whose lives are a living death are being raised up, and there's good news for the poor rather than the bad news they've long been told is all they deserve—which the Robodebt Royal Commission shows so plainly to be the case.

Jesus praises John the Baptist to the crowds in today's Gospel. He's the hard-hitting, no-nonsense herald of God's world-breaking and world-remaking promises, talking the tough talk of God's love and forgiveness. But far greater than the promises is the fulfillment. This is why John the Baptist is described by Jesus as less than the least in the Kingdom of God, because what for John was a promise is now a reality—because the long-foreshadowed Kingdom is now breaking out with joy; because John was the pointer, but here's the reality.

Now the most exalted, far above John the Baptist and all the prophets, is Mary, in whom it was all coming true. And sharing Mary's lofty status in this new scheme of things we now find little you and little me, children of God's Kingdom through our baptism, called to be

living signs in the world that God's promised good news is for real. How? Because we believe it, and because we let Christ transform our imaginations, our priorities and hence our lives—just as God transformed Mary, with her agreement.

One example of how this transformation works comes in our epistle today from James, which enjoins patience. Yes, the breakthrough has come but there's more to come, and the Church needs the right attitude as it waits. We're told that the wrong attitude is Christians grumbling against one another, as if we can't imagine anything more than scarcity and disappointment—acting as if we believe none of it.

Now, this call points us to the heart of how Christian ethics works. Christian morality isn't some ever-expanding code of good practice—the sort of thing organisations need because nobody has a moral vision to guide their behaviour. I'm talking about character ethics, not so-called deontological ethics—that is, not rule-based. Instead, it's about a certain noblesse oblige for us to recognise and to cultivate, which James Alison calls aristocratic belonging. It's a call for us to be our best selves. And that's not compatible, James tells us today, with Christians grumbling about one another.

Christ has made us a certain sort of people in the Holy Church, so that we now have to step up and be those people, like Mary did. Because the miracle of Christ coming to birth in Mary through her faith and trust is a miracle that you and I can share in. This is what the Eucharist invites us to do. The proof of God's promises coming true is found in the changed lives and the quality of relationships that we discover and cultivate in the Eucharistic community, which we can then joyfully share with the wider world.

The Lord be with you ...