

He comes to us where we are

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Robin Moore who works closely with those in need in our community often tells me that the Christmas season is often the worst time of the year for her people. Because Christmas is supposed to be all about family, friends and celebration, it brings up the grief and pain people feel about the past. At this time we can all think of people who have stories to tell of loss and pain. Of marriage breakups, difficulties with teenage children, partners with alcohol and drug problems, abusive spouses, estrangement from children and friends, death and dying. In my own family my father was always depressed at Christmas because his mother whom he loved very much had died on Christmas Eve when I was two.

Sooner or later, writes Craig Barnes in his book *Searching for Home*, trouble “visits every address and comes for a visit.” No one gets a free pass. Mental health experts back up Robin's experience that this can especially be the case during the Christmas holidays with its superficial gaiety and heightened expectations. During these difficult times that we all experience, it's all too easy, in the words of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, to have our vision “clouded by the mists of hell.” All of this forced gaiety and expectation about happy families has of course nothing to do with the actual message of the birth of the Christ, except in the most superficial way.

In amongst the Christmas shopping, the preparations, the madness of the end of the year it is good to be reminded of some very important people in the story of Jesus Christ, whose coming we prepare for this season. The Scriptures this week describe at least eighteen — eighteen! — sorts of people in pain and need who might be forgotten by the world: the blind, the lame, the diseased, the deaf, the dead, the poor, the dumb, the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoners, the bowed down, foreigners, orphans, widows, the humble, and then, my three favorites, those with feeble hands, weak knees, and fearful hearts.

And amongst all those is John the Baptist. We normally think of John as strong man of the wilderness—physically strong and unyielding in his convictions. Yet, today's gospel reveals a more vulnerable side to John. There he is in Herod's dark prison, wracked with doubt, wondering if the person he had identified as the Messiah—Jesus of Nazareth—was the Messiah after all.

From his prison cell he sends one of his followers to ask Jesus, ‘Are you the one to come, or have we to wait for someone else?’ John was really asking himself, ‘Have I got it wrong?’

As I said last week Jesus had not quite turned out as John expected. John had announced that Jesus would be rather like himself, a fiery prophet with a winnowing fork in his hand, gathering wheat and boring chaff. However, Jesus was not like this messiah John had pictured and proclaimed. He was instead a messenger of God's mercy, compassion and reconciliation.

It is so often the way that what happens in life is not what we expect. Is that not true? People who are significant for us can take paths that surprise and even disappoint us. Plans that we might have cherished do not materialize as we would have liked. A person we had hope of had not behaved how we expected. Hopes that we had entertained for some situation or another come to nothing. The loss of some precious hope or expectation or plan can unsettle us and leave us asking questions like John the Baptist. We can lose heart and get discouraged. The light and the fire can go out of us and our faith can be undermined.

As part of his response to John's puzzled question, Jesus pronounced a beatitude. There are different translations of the Greek. Our version is "blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me" but it can be translated, "Happy is the one who does not lose faith in me". Jesus was calling on John to not lose faith, not to lose heart, to take no offence at this strange but wonderful message in the midst of his confusion and disappointment. In our own dark times when we struggle to let go of our most cherished hopes and dreams, the Lord makes the same call on us not to lose faith in him. This is also the message of today's first reading, 'Strengthen all weary hands, steady all trembling knees, and say to all faint hearts, "Courage! Do not be afraid". Look your God is coming.' No matter how bitter our disappointment, how great our loss, it is always the case that the Lord is coming. This is the great message of Advent. Because the Lord keeps faith forever, because he is always faithful to us, we need not lose faith in him, even when so much else fails us, even ourselves. One of my favourite quotes is the one that goes, "I don't believe in God. That's OK—God believes in you".

One of the perennial criticisms of people without a faith in a personal God of those who do have such a faith is that religion and belief are just a crutch. They are props for weak people who cannot stand on their own. One of my dearest Christian friends who is now in her 80's and whom I owe so much of my faith journey to says, "God as my crutch?! He's my stretcher!!" And then she roars with laughter with so much joy and love in her eyes. But she means it.

You see the Lord comes to us where we are, as we are, in our need, in our struggles, with our doubts and disappointments. He does not ask us to leave where we are and to meet him in some rarified space. He speaks into, comes into, our own personal wilderness, just as he spoke into John's prison cell. He brings in his stretcher and helps us get on board. Perhaps your fiercely independent spirit makes you balk at such an image—I know mine does. But it is in our acceptance of the love and care of God that we find our strength and freedom. We find the ability to have compassion for those who struggle in the festive season and we can be gentle with others and ourselves.

Don't forget in this oh-so-commercialized time where people go mad, are disappointed, struggle and lose hope that the point of it all, the beginning of it all, is because God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to save us. Happy indeed are those who do not lose faith in such a promise. Amen