

***The journey toward justice: joy awaits!***

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor  
Third Sunday of Advent—11 December 2016  
The Reverend Martin Johnson.

*Isaiah 35.1-10; The Song of Mary; James 5.7-10; Matthew 11.2-11*

One of the great joys of Advent is hearing and reading the prophetic poetry of the Book of Isaiah. The central part of this great book is glorious poetry describing the movement of the people of Israel from captivity in Babylon to Jerusalem. Isaiah gives his people a remarkable gift; he gives them back their faith after years of isolation by means of rearticulating the old story, the story of Moses and the journey to the Promised Land— it is the meta-narrative of our faith the story from slavery to freedom from oppression to justice, from death to life.

As we've unpacked we have listening to Handel. He famously put the texts from Isaiah to music in the Messiah and we've also listened to his Coronation Anthem of 1727; most of us know Zadok the Priest but one of the Anthems is subtitled 'Let Justice and Judgement.' The text of the anthem is from Psalm 89: "Justice and judgment are the habitation of thy throne: mercy and truth shall go before thy face. Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound: they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of thy countenance. In thy name shall they rejoice all the day: and in thy righteousness shall they be exalted."

The voice on the end of the phone: "Would you consider allowing your name to go forward for the parish of O'Connor?" Eventually of course as you all know I said, "Yes", but O'Connor was unknown to me. Enter Google and I soon learnt that this Canberra suburb was named after Richard O'Connor, an eminent judge at the time of Federation and member of the committee that was to frame the Constitution. O'Connor believed that judges were to be not only interpreters but guardians of the constitution. Interpreters and guardians—it sounds like our role in regards the faith that we profess and hold dear. Justice and judgment are significant elements in this our Christian faith, intrinsic to the nature of God. Are we not the interpreters and guardians of justice and judgement, but importantly the order in which they come: justice, then judgement?

We heard some powerful words in this morning's Gospel reading. To put it into context it is worthwhile hearing the last week's Gospel reading. "I baptise you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

We are now a few months or weeks into Jesus' ministry, John is in prison and he is wondering what is happening. No doubt he has received word about what Jesus has been doing and he has doubts. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus responds by telling John the nature of his ministry; it is clearly not what John had been expecting. What John needs is a new understanding of who the Messiah is and what the Messiah does, and with what sort of people he does it. Jesus acknowledges that such a new understanding will be hard to come by. Paraphrasing Jesus: "If you can understand this you will be fully blessed." There were quite clearly many who felt threatened, seeing and hearing that Jesus is preoccupied with people who have been marginalised by their situations, who can do little or nothing for themselves. It prevented many from accepting Jesus as the Messiah. Like John, there was an expectation that the Messiah should be doing more about the Romans or stopping crime, or punishing criminals, heads should be rolling. Perhaps some

would rather wait for a leader more to their liking. ... Jesus, however, alone defines his messiahship.

I think that, if we are completely honest, we too have sought a messiah something like John envisaged. I wonder if we have said in exasperation with the writer of the Psalms: "O Lord how long will the ungodly flourish?" We want some sort of reparation; our default position can so often be judgmental. The problem comes when we confuse this with justice. There is so often a tendency in our society to blame others, asylum seekers, welfare recipients, people with addictions, people with blue hair, or those who have Mohammed in their name; the list is endless. We seek to find scapegoats, people to blame. "Ah yes," we say, "but God helps those who help themselves." They need to lift their game, wash their faces twice a day! In the life of Jesus, we see him helping those who cannot help themselves for whatever reason ... bringing justice.

What we most need is not judgement against others, we do not need to be vengeful or seek to blame others we need above all to be patient. The ministry of Jesus that we are called to emulate, our ministry, is not one of judgement, it is one of justice, of helping people to see, and walk and hear, and live, spiritually and materially. If we are to fulfil this ministry we must be patient. This business of patience and waiting is an anathema to many today, many folk want it all and they want it now, and woe betide anyone who gets in their way. But patience and waiting lie at the heart of our Advent journey.

Judgement will come soon enough as James told us, but that is not our concern, there can be no judgement without justice. Judgement is for the future; justice is what we strive for now. I don't think John the Baptist was wrong, but Jesus called first for justice. Jesus of course doesn't decry him for this, he praises John, no one up until then is greater than he is, but those of us who are born into this new order of things, the order of justice before judgement, the new order of the kingdom, are even greater.

This is, should be, for us a source of great joy; challenge yes, but great joy. It is this joy that lies at the centre of the third Sunday of Advent. It is Gaudete Sunday and in the Latin rite today *Gaudete* would be the first word spoken: "Gaudete, rejoice! Rejoice and again I say rejoice, the Lord is near!" The rose candle of Joy has been lit. Today our perspective is that of joy. Joy that comes into the world at Christmas is justice for all and this is our core business, as they say in management jargon. Judgement is black and white, right and wrong. Justice is much more difficult. It is grey requires of us patience and waiting. But joy comes with patience and waiting. On the induction night, a theme of journeying appeared, so I'll leave the last word to C.S. Lewis: "All joy ... emphasizes our pilgrim status; always reminds, beckons, awakens desire. Our best havings are our wantings."

Are we journeying towards justice? Because if we are, joy awaits!