



## What are we expecting?

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Year C, Advent 3

Isaiah 35:1-10

Matthew 11:2-11

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Many years ago, when I was young, and only a few years after I was ordained, I was appointed to ministry here at St Matthews with a beloved and revered priest, John Mullane, as my mentor and model.

One week he despatched me to a gathering of inner-city ministers.

This was a new experience for me. I'd never been to an ecumenical 'Minister's Fraternal' meeting before and had no idea what to expect. But I was eager to learn what it was all about. I resolved to observe quietly and learn how we could cooperate ecumenically in the inner city. This meeting was gathered in the parlour of the St Patrick's Cathedral presbytery – which I eventually found my way into!

I wasn't the first to arrive, and the men smiled benignly at me as I joined them. Gradually the group grew as a few more ministers – ordained and lay - joined and we stood around drinking tea. Eventually the host, a priest from St Pats said *"We are just waiting for the priest from St Matthews"*

Oops! I thought. "I'm here!" I said, and all eyes turned to me – a young woman not wearing the mandatory black shirt and white clerical collar!

I was not who they were expecting.

None of them had entertained the idea of working with an ordained woman before.

I could imagine *"Are **you** the one we are waiting for?"* might have been said with disbelief if they had dared to be so bold. Instead, it was *"Ah well, we might as well start!"* and they all turned away from me to speak with each other and find somewhere to sit.

Clearly, Cousin John, trapped in Herod's prison, wasn't at all sure if Jesus was the one they were waiting for. Jesus, it would seem, was not doing the expected

things – he was not setting about with liberating zeal and holy fire to cleanse the world nor taking an axe to the roots of injustice. He was not behaving like the *avenging liberator* they were waiting for at all! John was confused. Could this man really be the messiah Israel was waiting for?

Instead of answering directly Jesus asks his followers to tell John what they hear and what they see. It seems obvious from Matthew's recounting of the story, that Jesus aimed to **show** John the Baptist who he was (messiah or not) rather than **tell** him. He wanted others to describe what he, Jesus, was up to

*"Go tell John what you hear and see:" the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."*

These were certainly things to think about, but still it would seem this liberator was different from the 'Fiery Messiah' John had been preaching was coming. This one does not overthrow Rome or rebuild the temple instead he goes about the salvation that the people have been waiting for differently: he heals, restores dignity, uplifts the poor and announces God's realm through acts of justice and compassion. Not at all what the people were expecting! *Perhaps they should be waiting for someone else!*

Remember, the time this gospel we call Matthew was written, was a time of chaos in the region, 60 or more years after Jesus' death, 20 or more years after the fall of the temple, and probably after all those who had met Jesus had died.

Rome was reasserting its colonising power: land was being redistributed, government jobs reassigned, taxes increased and the local people displaced.

Times were tough, people were expecting change, those who were Jesus' followers were trying faithfully to hang on to the hope God would come to the rescue and save them.

Matthew's telling of this story about Jesus is one of reassurance for the fledgling 'Christian community'. He is telling them that even though they were expecting something different, change was happening, and Jesus's way would bring it about.

There is no dramatic overthrow of oppressive structures and powers in Matthew's story, no dramatic upheavals. Nevertheless, Jesus is building a new community, he is building, from the ground up, a community of people whose values

undermine oppression and demand mutual respect; whose dreams bring hope and shape a vision the people can work towards. Matthew seemed to be saying to his audience, in those last decades of the first century, that it is by persistent acts of kindness, through compassion and justice making actions that salvation will come.

- Jesus is building a movement.
- Jesus is gathering followers who are being taught and shown how to act with liberating concern and to relate to others with care and kindness.
- Jesus is not interested in mass hysteria that catches up a crowd in rage and turmoil.

If we take note, in Matthew's presentation

*Jesus wants the people to think about what they are expecting, to be aware of what they are seeing and expecting.*

The movement Jesus is building is a movement to last, a movement to catch hearts and minds, a movement that will be life-giving - not a flash in the pan attention grabber without substance.

But Jesus doesn't rubbish the faith of the people, nor their hope in the messiah John had spent his life proclaiming was coming. Nor does he disown or downplay John himself in any way. Rather he speaks very forcibly to honour and uphold John, and the preparatory work John has been doing to prepare the people for change.

*After all John has been working to grow the expectation that injustice can be overturned, and a community of mutual care and concern can be shaped to reflect the good news of God that Jesus was preaching and was enacting in his life and relationships.*

Many of us find ourselves identifying with John caught between hope and disappointment! We long for change, for more evidence that all our hard work on issues important to us: on the climate crisis, on lifting people out of poverty, on pay equity, on honouring the treaty and place of the tangata whenua, has had some effect! But it is so hard to see where or how we have had any effect. Our nation and our world are still in dire straits, we can barely stand to watch the news or read about the wars and the violence and the political turmoil.

We get excited when an action for change or challenge to the status quo grabs the headlines. *"Yes" and we pump the air in jubilation!*

But those moments are not the change we hope for.

That change, the sustainable change, will come from the persistent movement building that churches can be so good at. Work that ensures people catch a glimpse of the vision of how the world could be, and an understanding of why our earth will not sustain life as it is if we carry on abusing her. That the earth's resources are finite and our lifestyles will have to change, but that is nothing to fear for there is plenty if we learn to share and to accept enough. After all those who build virtual bank accounts in the billions and trillions of surplus dollars are simply people like us and enough to live well and flourish is what we all require not unimaginable wealth we can't use. After all, whether you are a politician or caregiver, an IT expert or a shop assistant, we have to be housed and educated and given access to health care, and a nation's economy is there to ensure all the people of the nation are provided for and have access to the means to live with dignity.

Change comes when we grow a movement that has a vision, holds hope, and recognises that strength lies in difference that learns to work together to the strengths of each. Christianity is a global movement that has wrought wonders over the centuries despite wreaking havoc and getting it wrong sometimes too. *Christianity, and this church of St Matthew-in-the-City, have the potential today to be a power for positive change; to argue our vision in the market place.*

To do so we need more brave and informed leaders (not all of whom will be ordained) with vision who gather others around to tell the story of hope and salvation.

If Advent offers us contemporary Christians anything today, it invites us to faith.

- It invites us to recognise God is not absent from our world;
- God is already at work through small vital acts of justice making,
- in the compassionate listening and caring relationships we develop,
- in acts of solidarity, and whenever we find the courage to speak out against alienation, marginalisation, disrespect and disregard.

***And more!*** Advent reminds us that while Jesus is the one - despite not seeming to be the one expected - he is not the only one! We too are invited to participate in the lifegiving work of justice-making, and to recognise the hopeful signs of the work of God in our midst even if it is not what we expect.