



Rev Helen Jacobi

Are you the one?

Year A Advent 3

Isaiah 35:1-10

Matthew 11:2-11

11 December 2022

I was struck this week by John Campbell's powerful reporting on TV One News interviewing some young people in detention as teenagers.¹

You may have seen the interview when he asks a young woman who has been in detention for 3 years how often her family have visited – once she says.

Heartbreaking.

A crushing sense of being alone.

Perhaps akin to John the Baptist in prison in our gospel reading today.

John's haunting message which he sends to Jesus "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

He sounds alone.

John the Baptist, the fiery prophet full of certainty, who had announced Jesus as the one, baptizes him, and continues to preach repentance.

John who had heard God's voice at Jesus' baptism.

John who everyone felt was Elijah the prophet returned – with the way he dressed, the way he spent most of his time in the desert, the way he preached fire and brimstone.

He couldn't have sounded more certain of himself and his message.

¹ <https://www.1news.co.nz/2022/12/06/exclusive-john-campbell-interview-with-locked-up-teen-ram-raiders/>

But he went too far for Herod, the king.

John denounced Herod for his divorce and remarriage and so John was thrown in prison.

No doubt a pretty cold, dark place.

And so he began to think– this doesn't really seem how it was supposed to go.

Shouldn't Jesus have made his move by now to overthrow the Romans and the Temple priests with them?

What is going on?

What happened to all the promises the prophets of old made about the Messiah?

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Jesus, as usual, does not give a yes/no answer.

But he does give an answer that John might understand as a yes “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf ear, the dead are raised”.

Jesus is quoting Isaiah and other prophets – and specifically Isaiah as we heard from ch 35 “then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer ..”

These phrases when quoted by Jesus are really code for “yes, I am the one”.

Before we go on to what happened next we do need to note the problematic nature of these verses.

Using the idea of the “curing” of people’s disabilities as a sign of the presence of God or the presence of the Messiah is of course difficult.

Disabled writers and commentators² tend to point out that these verses are about God and a metaphor for God’s transformative power.

So they are imagery to describe God rather than a description of the people with disabilities themselves.

² The Bible and Disability; a commentary ed Melcher, Parsons and Yong p217ff

They acknowledge that imagery might work from a literary point of view but not so well from a real life point of view, and so sit with the discomfort of these verses.

We don't know if Jesus' message made it back to John in prison. We do know in chapter 14 of Matthew's gospel that John is killed at the behest of Herod.

It is a brutal and bloody act.

And Matthew says "when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." (14:3).

What was Jesus thinking – personal grief for his cousin; fear of Herod? deep sorrow at the way things were going?

The crowds don't leave him alone for long; they follow and so the scene is set for the feeding of the 5000.

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus answers this question with deeds more than words.

He feeds those who gather; he listens; he blesses.

Where are we at with the question "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Advent keeps pulling us back from getting to Christmas too early.

As Diana said last week "In Advent we are called into a state of active waiting. This is a state that recognises and embraces glimpses of God's presence in the world. It is a state that recalls God's historic, yet ever present, actions.

It is a state that speaks of the almost -but not quite- nature of our Christian living which yearns for but cannot quite achieve divine perfection."³

So in this state of waiting we find that instead of singing Christmas Carols about babies and manglers we are with John in his prison cell. Doesn't seem very joyful when this 3rd Sunday of Advent has us light the candle of joy.

And yet we know the complexity of human life mixes joy and suffering all the time; hope and sorrow; birth and death.

³ Rev Diana Rattray sermon Advent 2

In John Campbell's TV written piece that goes with the TV interview he talks about the friendship of the young women, how they have braided each other's hair and how they giggled when he asked them to choose names for the article – popstars, of course.

Some joy in a dark place.

For many of us Christmas will bring joy – gathering with loved ones; for others of us we will miss loved ones.

Many of us will have the privilege of a holiday, some beach time.

At Christmas we will affirm that Jesus has come, we don't have to wait for another.

The challenge then is to live our lives in a way that shows that this affirmation is true.

To value and support the social workers and other teams who work with the young people John Campbell interviewed.

To believe the best of people and not the worst.

To lift ourselves above the anger and anxiety of public discourse and not let that anger take over our lives and our communities.

To not let despair about the climate, or the church, or the economy or the pandemic overtake our capacity to hope and be joyful.

Nor on the other hand to lapse into platitudes about a joyful Christmas when we know it is not all joy.

It is a balancing act – which is why the lectionary always gives us challenging readings for Advent 1,2 and 3.

We get to Matthew's version of the Christmas story next Sunday.

So wherever you are on the joy/ not so joyful continuum, find a balance point; find a place where you can ask the question "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

and hear the answer – look around you, what do you see?

And know that you will be able to see love and life in all its fullness.

The Christ child will come, and we will give thanks.