

### The Third Sunday of Advent

You can still go to visit the place where John was put in prison. It was in Herod's palace at Machaeras on the edge of the Dead Sea. It is still a breathtakingly beautiful place with the blue of the sea and sky contrasting with the white of the desert sand, but John would not have been able to see it.

He would have been confined in a dark underground dungeon awaiting what was bound to be his execution. He was there because he was a prophet with an immense following of disciples, including many of Jesus' own disciples and possibly Jesus himself. The imprisonment would have given him time to reflect on his life's work; a work, which made him in Jesus' eyes the greatest person ever born and therefore the greatest of the prophets. He was able to proclaim the message of all the prophets that one day someone would come from God who would strengthen weary hands and bring an end to sorrow and lament. Not only that. The time of the one who was coming was very close and people needed to prepare themselves by lives of repentance and sincerity.

John knew that the suffering of humanity, the injustice and the pain, was something that God in his utter goodness wanted to address and heal. As he faced his own death perhaps he deserved to send that question by way of the messengers to his cousin Jesus. 'Are you the one who is to come, or have we got to wait for someone else?' John would have had a deep appreciation of the answer. The messengers were to return to John telling him what they saw and heard happening at the hands of Jesus. Jesus quoted Isaiah, with whom John would have been very familiar. 'The blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear and the dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor; and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me.'

I believe that those words would have brought John to a happy death at the hands of King Herod. He was able to see and believe in the darkness of that dungeon that Jesus was most certainly the one who was to come. In the words of Peter Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. He was the answer to Isaiah's prayer that God should tear open the heavens and come down.

Our world is very different from that of John, but if he was languishing in one of our prisons today he would see similar human suffering injustice and the brokenness and deception that invades all human experience. Like him we too must never turn our backs on it. Through baptism we are prophets with Jesus and with him we look at our world and hold the suffering and darkness in our prayer and love. We see at best patches of fragile peace; at worst seemingly insoluble situations of endless violence, fear, deprivation and exploitation of the world's resources. We see a vast number of human beings forgetting that the world and all that it contains belongs to God and falling upon the beautiful things God gives in an insatiable thirst and even greed for goods and commodities that are falsely believed to bring new hope.

John the Baptist knew and we know that Jesus Christ is the divine life and his word bestows upon us the power which transfigures the face of the earth and makes all things new. Jesus is the Word of hope who offers the great hope of the fullness of life to all people. It is the message of Jesus that brings peace; it is the message and presence of Jesus that enables men and women to live every moment fully and it is the message of Jesus which every human being is created to hear. Jesus is the only way to authentic human life.

The apostle James, in our New Testament reading for today, speaks of the farmer waiting patiently for the precious fruit which follows the autumn and spring rains. That precious fruit is the coming of the Lord Jesus into every human heart and we are instrumental in that coming. In the words of the prophet and of Jesus himself 'the Spirit of the Lord has been given to me. He has sent me to bring Good News to the poor.' That is our baptismal task; that is work of evangelisation which is our responsibility growing out of our own relationship with Jesus.

The remaining days of Advent are given to us to improve our response and take more seriously our discipleship and we would do well to begin by responding to John's invitation. 'Repent' was his command to the people of his time and it is the same to us. It is time for us to turn in a new direction in our way of living. Perhaps it is a troubling relationship we need to see in a new way; perhaps it is turning away from our dependence, like that of so many, on pleasure, possessions and power, which are incapable of fulfilling the deepest yearnings of the human heart; perhaps we are being called by the Lord to be more faithful to prayer and listening to the Word of God

Repentance is about laying the foundations and opening ourselves up to the Spirit of Christ so that he can work in our lives. The truth of the message of John is that every human heart has a place for Jesus Christ and a living relationship with him. As those who hold this precious fruit, this great treasure, it is for us to put Jesus at the centre of our lives so that others might come to know him. They will know him when our love and concern bring peace or relief to another; when our respect helps someone else to feel valued; when our welcome and warmth bring another into the healing and peace of community and that feeling of being wanted.

The proof for John when he asked about whether or not Jesus was the one to come came when Jesus told the messengers to tell John what they saw and heard. It is our task as the Lord's followers and those commissioned to go out and bear fruit, to ensure that the presence of our risen Lord is recognisable in the sacrificial nature our love modelled on that of Jesus himself.