



Sunday Reflection

Season of Advent

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 13 December 2020

Advent 3

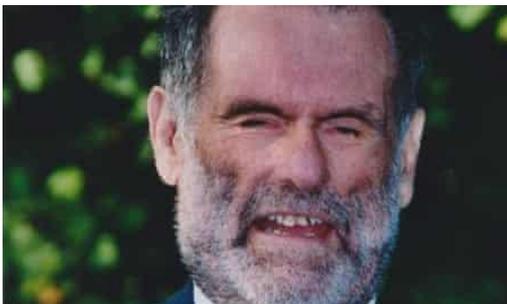
Gaudate Sunday

Hope isn't something we should save up for better times. But it can take a season of darkness for us to recognize the light. How can the times we are living through help us to rediscover the living hope of our faithful God, promised at our baptism? Today we rejoice in the assurance of that blessing.

Reflection for this week's Gospel

"...all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord." *Isaiah 61. 9-10*

An Illustration to set the scene



The late theologian John Hull, an Australian by birth, who became professor of religious education in Birmingham, lost his sight completely in mid-life. He was never really reconciled to being 'a disabled person', but as his sight failed and he journeyed on through blindness he kept audio diaries which were subsequently made into a film, called 'Notes on Blindness' which you can view online.¹ In a pivotal

¹ Peter Middleton and James Spinney, *Notes on Blindness* (Archer's Mark in association with Fee Fie Foe Films and 104 Films and in co-production with Agat Films and Cie and ARTE, France,

scene he recounts an intense moment of transformation when he sensed God throw a dark cloak over him and then experienced a feeling of deep grace and thought, 'It's a gift. So the question is, not why have I got it, but what am I going to do with it?'

He reframes the 'darkness' of blindness from impaired humanity to the gift of perceiving differently. He points out, for example, that a blind person's hands no longer function mainly to do things, but can be used to know things and appreciate beauty. In his theological reflections on blindness, he critiques the reading of the Bible through the lens of sight. He contrasts the way Christians have seen the healing of blind Bartimaeus, redeemed when he is restored to sight, with the blindfolded Jesus of the Passion, redeeming through participation in human weakness, by entering into its dark.

It's through the imagination of artists we can all be enabled to reframe our experiences and see them in a different light.

For example, over the Advent and Christmas season of 2014-15 an art installation was made for Salisbury Cathedral, based on the font. The font is shaped like a star, with water spilling from the four corners.



Bethlehem Star by Bruce Munro, Salisbury Cathedral, 2014-15, photo by Ash Mills

The water reflects the cathedral above and around the font. In his work, 'Star of Bethlehem', the artist Bruce Munro, referenced the journey of the Magi and transformed the font into that Bethlehem Star. A projector above the star font surrounded it with another broken star of lighted dots and dashes, actually the story of the Magi from Matthew chapter 2, translated into Morse Code – a sign of the journey of faith. The symbolism was heightened by the fact that the installation only became visible as the daylight declined to evening darkness.

2016); extracts from the audio diaries are published in John M. Hull, *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness*, SPCK Classics (London: SPCK, 2013).

Looking at the teaching of the Gospel

In Isaiah's text today, from the period after the Babylonian exile, the prophet calls people to see their situation in a new way, from mourning and regret at what has been lost and destroyed to gladness at what will come, even if they cannot see it yet. What strikes me this year about our reading from Isaiah is that the message of deliverance, the good news, is offered to a people who have known darkness. It is to those who mourn in Zion that gladness will come.

And in today's Gospel we encounter John the Baptist again but, in the words of John, rather than Mark, and from a different perspective. In this version of the scene, John has to account for who is and what he is doing to the Jewish Temple authorities. He is prophesying and baptising. What do these actions say about him? Again, he quotes Isaiah and stresses that he is a sign, a harbinger of the Messiah to come. In Mark, Jesus is yet to come to the Jordan for baptism himself. Today, he is already here in the crowds, present but as yet, unrecognised: "Among you stands one who you do not know, the one who is coming after me."

This Sunday, Gaudete Sunday, reminds us that it's too easy to put our hope on hold – until we can celebrate the birth of Jesus, until we are offered the vaccine. Our Scriptures tell us that the hope is here already. The question for us is: can we see it? Do we recognise it? There are plenty of false hopes, dreams that won't bring fulfilment. But we know real hope when we see it because it is there in hard times, indeed sometimes it takes the darkness for us to notice the coming of the light. The hope we have is a hope we can trust. It is to be found in today's Epistle: "The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this" (1 Thess. 5.24).

How can we reflect on the application to our lives?

Last week, Reuben spoke about the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit and the challenges which we must face as baptised Christians. At our baptism the water was poured upon us as a sign of God's creating and saving power, 'that made the desert a watered garden'. And in that action, we became both born anew through the Holy Spirit (John 3.5) and united with Christ in his

death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6.3-11), transformed by the saving water of life

So perhaps it is not so odd to have a Sunday in the middle of Advent when we rejoice. We are the people of now, the people living through COVID, through separation, through disruption. The word of hope is for us. And, as our world sees the glimmer of hope in the roll-out of vaccines against the coronavirus, we may experience today's readings as especially poignant because we can understand the significance of hope, perhaps as never before. There could be no better time to account for our identity as people of promise who have been baptised in water and, as the baptismal prayer says, been 'brought with Christ through the waters of death, to be one with him in his resurrection'.

Rather than wish away this time of waiting, we can ask ourselves, how is it helping us to rediscover the hope that is at the heart of our faith: the hope of forgiveness, the promise of salvation from a faithful God? How can we use this time to reconnect with our calling as people of hope to build up the ancient ruins, to repair devastation and to show others, through our rejoicing, that spring will again renew the earth, to remind a confused and hurting world that they are a people that the 'Lord has blessed' and that the darkness has not overcome it.

Father,

'Sustain your people by your Spirit
to be hope and strength to the world' (Baptismal prayer).

**"...all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the Lord." *Isaiah 61. 9-10***

Please share your response to this reflection to Rector@SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk – did anything speak to you? Did you feel challenged, angered, consoled by something in the words? How did God's spirit move you as you read it? Have you shared the words with someone else? Is this a worthwhile thing to make available to folk whilst we cannot meet for corporate worship to share in word and sacrament? What are your thoughts?

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