



# Sunday Reflection Ordinary Time



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

For Sunday 17 December 2023

## Advent 3- Gaudate Sunday

at St Johns the Curate will preach

On this third Sunday of Advent we remember what we are waiting for – the light that scatters the world's darkness – and we rejoice that we have been called to witness to its lifegiving power.

*He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. (John 1.7)*

### **An illustration to set the scene**

It was during the purvey after Kenny's funeral this week that a story emerged that was both ordinary and remarkable at the same time. Kenny's friend Stevie, who had come from India in his youth, had been travelling to his work as a civil servant in Glasgow when he got into conversation with the conductor, Kenny, who said 'I'll see you on your way home'. He did and the conversation just continued. For the next 35 years they went out to coffee and to talk together twice a week. When Stevie went to the Gurdwara (Sikh Temple) the week

after Kenny's death, they said, 'but you're never here on a Monday' and he had to explain why his weekly routine would now always be different.

Friendship is just an ordinary part of life. But what a story of faithful and mutual delight this is. It shows just how much one person can touch the lives of others (and the crowd that attended Kenny's funeral witnessed to just how many lives that had been true of). Never underestimate the light that one life can shine on the people and the world around them. It makes one feel thankful and glad at the same time, even at a moment of grief and loss.

### **Today's Gospel teaching**

Perhaps you had a sense of déjà vu when you heard the Gospel just now. After all, last week we heard about John being the one who prepares the way for Jesus, who looked like Elijah, baptised in the Judean wilderness and pointed to Jesus as the greater one who would come after. Yet in John's Gospel, set for this week, we are given a different angle on John the Baptist from the one Mark provided last week. How many differences do you spot?

Well, to start with, John does not refer to him as the Baptist or Baptiser. He is 'John, a man sent from God'. This account of John, set in the cosmic beginning of John's Gospel, emphasises his critical role in God's plan of salvation for the entire world. He is *God's* emissary. And his role is to be the first witness to Jesus. Neither Mark nor John have the traditional Christmas story to give expression to the Incarnation. It is John, not the star or the wise men that announces the coming of God to earth. And what he witnesses to is that Jesus is the light that will scatter the darkness. In other words, at the very time that Jesus is emerging into his public ministry, he is to be acknowledged as the one who at the end of time will usher in the final redemption of the world.

In today's reading the emphasis is not on warnings and repentance but on clarity of message – who John is and who he is not. He uses the parallels being drawn between himself and Elijah to say who he really is, the one sent to point to Jesus, God's greatest gift to the world. In the next verses – 'the next day' in fact - he sees Jesus coming towards him and will declare, '*Here is the lamb of God who*

*takes away the sin of the world'* (John 1.29). Jesus must have been in the crowd as John was speaking. But only John recognised him. God is in our midst. How often do we recognise him?

## **How we can apply the teaching to our own lives**

Today is known by the church as Gaudete Sunday from the Latin for 'Rejoice' – and also Rose Sunday. It is breather from penitential reflection. A moment to rejoice at the knowledge that our Saviour's coming means our redemption and salvation for all. Until then we are still living in the darkness – of war, of broken relationships and lives, of death- but an inextinguishable light has been lit, and if we know our Bible, we know the end of the story. That is why our waiting is hopeful and why we anticipate our Lord's birth with joy as well as with sorrow for our failings.

When you get home read again the verses from Isaiah set for today and the Psalm which are bursting with gladness at the goodness of God to us. Psalm 126 contains some of my favourite verses:

*May those who sow in tears*

*reap with shouts of joy.*

*Those who go out weeping,*

*bearing the seed for sowing,*

*shall come home with shouts of joy,*

*carrying their sheaves. (Psalm 126. 56-7)*

What a moving image of the promise of hope restored, of grief transformed.

And this reminds us what kind of witnesses we are to be. Not like the Reverend I.M. Jolly, but showing that our faith lightens our burdens and makes us glad to know Christ and to be together in worship and fellowship. What attracted new members to the early church was not doctrine, but the hospitality offered by those who followed *The Way*. We are glad to be here and glad for where we are going.

*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,*

*my whole being shall exult in my God;*

*for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,*

*he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,*

*as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,*

*and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (Isaiah 61.10)*

We have dressed our church – and some of us ourselves – for celebration. And it is that joy that we have to offer a hurting world. We may not be in a particularly happy state of mind, but joy is deeper than that. It is our response to the knowledge that

*The LORD has done great things for us (Psalm 126.3)*  
and promises greater.

When people packed the church for Kenny's funeral this week, many commented with delight on the Christmas tress and the festive feel. It maybe was not what they expected. But they were moved and cheered.

*'The light of Christ scatter the darkness from your heart and mind'* we say when a candle is handed at baptism, and we pray, *'Christ shine from you to give joy to the world'*. May the light of Christ burn strongly for you this Christmas and may this faithful community persevere to find ways to shine that light beyond these walls in the year to come.

*He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. (John 1.7)*

## at St Margarets the Rector will preach

"Rejoice always," says St Paul. "Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances." In faith let us bring to God our prayers and praises.

*"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness."  
John 1:23*

### **An illustration to set the scene**

We are getting close to Christmas, and at some point during the festivities many of us will encounter some version of Charles Dickens' **A Christmas Carol**, the story of the redemption of the cruel miser *Ebenezer Scrooge*.

In one powerful episode, Scrooge is taken by the *Ghost of Christmas Present* to a party hosted by Scrooge's cheerful nephew, Fred.

Scrooge and the ghost look on, unseen by Fred and his guests, who are playing a game called "Yes and No".

In the game, people have to guess what Fred is thinking about, and Fred can only answer **yes or no**.

Fred says he is thinking of an unwanted creature, but not a rat.

The answer, revealed amidst much laughter, is Scrooge himself.

Scrooge has a moment of revelation, when he begins to see himself as others see him, and to understand that he needs to change.

### **Today's Gospel teaching**

John the Baptist seems to be playing "**Yes and No**" with the religious officials who have been sent to question him.

"Who are you?" they ask.

But they only get "no" for an answer.

Not the Messiah. Not Elijah. Not the prophet.

But this is not a game, and John's questioners quickly lose patience.

They need to take something back to the authorities in Jerusalem, some understanding of what John is up to.

A strange preacher by the River Jordan may not seem very significant, but in the heated atmosphere of Judea, a small spark has the potential to cause a big explosion, and no one wants that.

If John is just baptising the local population, fair enough.

But if he starts talking about the Messiah, even worse, claiming to be the Messiah, everyone is in trouble.

The Romans will react to any suggestion of a Jewish liberator, and clamp down on carefully defended religious freedoms.

No wonder the Jerusalem authorities are nervous.

John is not the Messiah.  
He is not a prophet, he says.

He is something that sounds more harmless, but is in reality just as radical and dangerous.

He is the voice crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord".

His questioners miss the significance of his answer.

There is no moment of revelation for them, no understanding of how they must change.

We, however, know what John is saying.

He is referring us to Isaiah chapter 40, with its glorious promises of God's redemption of his people.

The valleys and hills will be levelled, proclaims Isaiah.

The rough ground will be made smooth.

The Lord will return in glory to the defeated and demoralised people of Israel.

John's questioners have missed the astonishing and dangerous truth he proclaims: ***God is coming to begin the final work of salvation.***

Like the "Yes and No" game in **A Christmas Carol**, this series of questions and answers has produced something surprising and transforming.

For Scrooge, it is one of a series of events that change his life for ever and create for him a miraculous Christmas Day.

In the case of John and his questioners, the truth that emerges is transforming for far more than just one man.

This is the moment of truth, the moment for which God's people have been waiting for centuries.

John has done what he came for; he has testified to the light.

A new dawn is coming, a Christmas Day when everything is transformed.

### **How we can apply the teaching to our own lives**

The world can sometimes seem a hostile place, full of anxiety and dread.

It can be hard to hope, hard to imagine something better.

The season of Advent allows for that.

It encourages us to think about the things we usually try to avoid, traditionally heaven, hell, death and judgement.

It reminds us that we are frail and mortal.

But it invites us to set that knowledge in the context of the coming of Christ.

All those centuries ago, in Palestine, a light dawned that will never be extinguished.

**"Make straight the way of the Lord"** – words proclaimed by Isaiah, echoed by John, to be taken to heart by all of us – as we make room in our lives for the coming of the One who shows us a truth full of hope and joy.

*"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness."*

*John 1:23*

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