

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Third Sunday of Advent

readings: [Job 19.23-27a](#), [2 Thessalonians 2.1-5, 13-end](#), [Luke 20.27-38](#)

11 December 2022

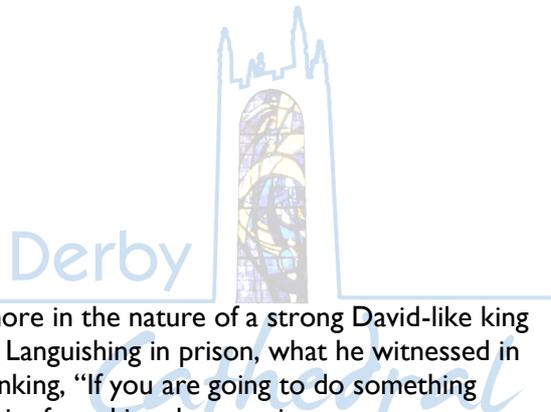
“Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?”

In our Gospel reading today, John the Baptist is in prison. Arguably he was a political prisoner. Not only had John attracted enormous popular support, he had been an outspoken critic of Herod's family. John's mission had been to prepare the way for the coming Messiah.

After many long weeks of incarceration, he could be forgiven if disillusionment and disappointment was in the air and he felt the need for some reassurance. Certainly it is not surprising that he was anxious about whether he had succeeded in his task. Had he done enough? Was Jesus really the one who would save God's people, or did they have to wait for someone else? We might think it strange that the one who had prophesied the advent of the Messiah had to ask. After all, Jesus had come to the river Jordan to be baptised by John and John had been witness to that extraordinary experience of the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus with that vivid sense that God was saying 'This is my Son, listen to him'. He was then witness to some of the things Jesus was saying and doing. But on the other hand, Jesus wasn't quite what John was expecting.

We need only to remind ourselves of John's preaching of repentance in last Sunday's gospel reading to understand what he was expecting.

Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees;
Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit
is cut down and thrown into the fire....
His winnowing-fork is in his hand,
and he will clear his threshing floor
and will gather his wheat into the granary;
but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.



Hence, like those of his time, John was probably expecting more in the nature of a strong David-like king who would come and free his people with a degree of force. Languishing in prison, what he witnessed in Jesus probably didn't look all that promising. He might be thinking, "If you are going to do something spectacular, now would be a good time". So we can forgive him for asking the question.

Jesus describes John as being 'more than a prophet'. Perhaps our image of prophets is of people who rant and rave, pestering people in power to change their ways. And by all accounts John did a fair deal of that. But prophets are not always doing or proclaiming. The letter of James reminds us in our middle reading this morning that the prophets of the Old Testament 'spoke in the name of the Lord', but also that they submitted 'with patience' to God's will. John followed their example by speaking out in the Lord's name to bring about change. Even through the hints of disappointment and John's need for reassurance, he also showed himself as one who can patiently submit to imprisonment awaiting the Messiah and the change he would bring. Jesus wanted to reassure John that things were indeed changing.

Hence, Jesus says to John's disciples, look again and tell John what you hear and see, reminding them of the prophecy of Isaiah about what the coming of the Kingdom would look like:

The blind receive their sight,
the lame walk....
the poor have good news brought to them.

Words Jesus himself also reads on another occasion in the synagogue at Nazareth - and for the same purpose - to declare that Isaiah's prophesy has been fulfilled in his own person.

Everything Jesus was doing pointed towards change—towards the presence of God and the coming of his kingdom, but there was the potential for John to miss it because he was looking for something different. Now, in his period of enforced stillness and reflection, Jesus invites him to look for the signs of what God is doing through him. If what John believed – that Jesus was the Messiah, the chosen One of God – was true, then John would not have lived his life in vain, no matter what happened to him in days to come. John's period of reflection was enforced by circumstances. For us, Advent, too, is a time, amongst other things, for quiet, patient reflection amid the razzamatazz of the secular month of Christmas all around us. A time to look more intently for the signs of the kingdom which can so easily get drowned out and go unnoticed.

It can often seem that change is brought about only by constant effort and struggle. Yet any effort to bring freedom, hope and harmony into our fractious and divided world also involves waiting patiently. Waiting with patience is very different from vainly hoping for change without being prepared to do anything to bring it about. Waiting expectantly for God's will to be done involves a great deal more than waiting aimlessly for someone else to make everything better. We are called to wait purposefully, to prepare and to pray. Thrown into prison, John the Baptist might easily have lost heart over preparing the Lord's way. But he continued to witness to the coming of the Messiah by his patience and determination in the face of intimidation. John's greatness lay in his steadfastness in believing that God's will should be carried out, whatever it cost him personally. And in that sense, his patient waiting prefigures Jesus's own passion and crucifixion.

The sense of Advent Hope coloured by the warnings of the scripture readings we hear during this season is not so much about a fearful judgment, but a joyful readiness for the signs of the coming of God into our human experience. The everyday situations we find ourselves in may seem mundane by comparison, yet we are all called in our own particular way to bringing about God's will in our world. This season of Advent reminds us that waiting patiently is part of working for change. The new age that dawned with the birth of Christ had been eagerly anticipated for generations by prophets and people alike. As we once again await the great festival celebrating Christ's birth, we perhaps need to be reminded that in order to build a fairer and happier world there are times we need to speak out in God's name and times when we need to wait in God's time. Knowing the difference demands discernment. Waiting involves holding fast to what we believe, acknowledging at times periods of frustration or doubt or even despair, and praying for the wisdom to know what to say and do and when to say and do it. Maybe something those who disrupted our service last Sunday should take onboard.

At its heart, our eucharist is a sacrament of unity, but through that unity it is a sacrament of change, and in it we express not just our hope for our own transformation and the transformation of people's lives and of the world, but a foretaste that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the transformation we await is assured.

As we continue our journey through this Advent season, it is an invitation to welcome Christ into our hearts. It is a time for renewed faith and commitment. It is a time to hold fast to the hope that Christ will come again in glory.

Through all the anticipation of Christmas in the next fortnight, it is worth keeping this promise alive, so that we can say when Christmas arrives at last: "Amen, come Lord Jesus!"

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