

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent (A)

11<sup>th</sup> December 2016

'Tell John what you hear and see ...'

Is 35: *the eyes of the blind shall be opened ... everlasting joy on their faces ...*

James 5: *be patient until the Lord's coming*

Mt 11: 2–11: John heard what Christ was doing. 'Are you the one who is to come?'

It's *Gaudete* Sunday, and the opening antiphon for this Mass is "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice." "Rejoice," that's the translation of the word "Gaudete." Why do we rejoice, then? We rejoice, because Christmas is near: a fortnight away, the celebration of the birth of Our Saviour. Of course we rejoice ... Christmas is coming!

But, the text we get from Matthew's Gospel today is all about prison! We're told to rejoice, but what we hear of is St John the Baptist in prison ... perhaps the last place you'd expect to rejoice. But even John, imprisoned by King Herod, can rejoice to know that the Messiah has come, that Jesus is Lord, and that His Kingdom is coming. But he has to be sure. We might be surprised that John feels the need to check ... "Are you the Christ?" At the River Jordan, as he met and welcomed and baptized Jesus, he was sure; when he sent away his own disciples to follow Jesus and no longer himself, he was sure; when he testified about Jesus,

'Behold, the Lamb of God,' he seemed very sure. But now? Now in prison, perhaps John has 'a wobble.' Locked away in Herod's dungeon, John is struggling with some doubts. Has his ministry been a waste? Has all his preaching and baptizing and proclaiming the Messiah been mistaken? Suddenly, in his suffering, John gets worried that Jesus is not the Messiah ... Maybe John was still somewhat locked into the Jewish mind-set of expecting a more militant Messiah, one who would rout the Romans, cast out the occupiers. But this is not what Jesus does. Jesus approaches His ministry in a very different way.

We too need to be convinced of the absolute truth of Jesus. Like St John the Baptist, we may sometimes have our doubts, our 'wobbles.' Especially in times of particular suffering, we may be prone to ask the same question as John: 'Why isn't God acting in the way I would expect?' / 'Why isn't Jesus more pro-active in the ways I would predict?' We also need to receive a reply from Jesus, as John did.

Our Lord's answer, to John the Baptist, and to us this

Advent, is a gentle answer, filled with the power of Jesus as Messiah, with plenty of evidence of His fulfilling the prophecies. Jesus refers John to all His healing miracles, and His preaching the Good News to the poor ... all in fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecies of the Messiah. "Tell John what you hear and see," He tells the questioners. John would have been reassured to be reminded that so much of what is written in the OT about the 'One to Come' is truly happening here, in Jesus. He needed that reassurance directly from Our Lord. He needed that reminder that the Lord first of all brings consolation and healing. He brings challenge and corrects error, too, but He first brings mercy and forgiveness. He takes pity on the poor and the weak, and binds up hearts that are broken.

It's a beautiful reminder to us, too, as we listen in to the reply John received. The 'One who Was to Come' of old did indeed come. He came in poverty at Bethlehem; He lived in simplicity in Nazareth; He carried out His ministry as an itinerant preacher, not currying favour with the high and mighty. But He bestowed His divine concern, His

healing love, and His merciful forgiveness on the ordinary people ... on us, in other words. We need have no fears that He is looking after us, if we stay close to Him. John in prison felt suddenly fearful of what his life held for him; but a single word from Our Lord, put Him at ease, helped His heart to trust, even in the face of the persecution he was experiencing and the martyrdom he was going to endure.

As we come closer to Christmas, let's put our total trust in Our Lord whose infinite concern is for each one of us, in our life's every need. In Advent, our desire for Jesus needs to grow, to well up into a real longing for Him. Christmas should be a total celebration of God's having entered into our world, and our personal world; it's not just a historical remembrance of 2000yrs ago; it's something real and personal for me, now. Let's hear again those words with which Jesus ends His reply to John: "Happy is the man who does not lose faith in Me." *Jesus, my Lord and Saviour, speak to me, now; strengthen me in weakness and doubts, and let me delight in Your coming amongst us: originally at Bethlehem, and now every day in the Church.*