

- Today is the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent and the colour of the candle is pink – representing Joy – and the poetic reading from Isaiah is certainly an outpouring of joy in the hope of a transformation of life through faith in God “*the desert shall rejoice and blossom;*
  - *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*
  - *And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;”*
  - After a very pessimistic judgemental chapter 34 in Isaiah, this chapter 35 encourages us to hope that a glorious transformation *is* always possible with God and this is echoed by Jesus in the Gospel reading – Jesus is obviously quoting from the Scriptures he and John know so well when he tells John’s disciples what to report back to John in prison in order to give him hope and reassurance.

*“Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers<sup>[c]</sup> are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them<sup>6</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.”*

- Jesus is *doing* the things Isaiah prophesies – healing and transforming lives – he’s sending a message to John that “**Yes I am the Messiah – you were right all along – it’s just that I’m not bringing in God’s rule in the way you had been expecting** - with military might”
- John had doubtless built up a strong, perfectly rational and widely held mental picture of how the long expected Messiah was going to save the Jewish people (as a mighty warrior to overcome the oppressive Roman regime) rather than someone who was full of compassion and love, healing the sick and calmly and peacefully gathering followers by forgiving their sins and drawing them into a right relationship with God.
- Being alone in a prison cell, knowing that he was unlikely to come out for a very long time, if at all, John has started to worry that he had done the right thing – maybe he had picked the wrong person to believe in – there were always false Messiahs turning up – had he made a huge fool of himself, thinking he was responding to God’s call to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah?
- going over and over things in your mind can undermine your confidence in what you think.
- So he needs reassurance that Jesus is truly who John had believed him to be from the beginning.
- and **Jesus gives him that reassurance** – by telling John’s disciples to report back what Jesus was doing....echoing the joyful and hope-filled words of the prophet Isaiah  
And why was John the Baptist shut up in prison?
- Well .....what do we know about him?
- John the Baptist was an outspoken, individualistic man with a strange diet and fashion sense (remember we are told elsewhere John the Baptist ate locusts and honey, and wore clothing of camel hair), who lived alone in the desert and yet had started to attract people out there to see him and hear what he was proclaiming – there was something compelling and authentic about him :
- John the Baptist was passionate and focussed on challenging people’s moral behaviour :
- he was proclaiming that the long awaited Messiah was coming and people needed to be ready to receive him by repenting now of their sins.
- A call that got people streaming out to the wilderness to be baptised by John in the river Jordan - even the Pharisees – something that really annoyed John who called them a brood of vipers – as they appeared to be coming for repentance as a sort of insurance policy against the judging Messiah, even though they didn’t seem to change their actions, so were not truly repenting
- But then John went one rebuke too far- he accused Herod of immoral behaviour when the King married his own brother’s wife- too much to take for Herod, who had him locked up, away from any more opportunities to undermine Herod away from his increasing number of followers who believed John was a prophet, sent by God.

- **John the Baptist *was* a prophet** – Jesus calls him the best there had ever been- John bridges the gap between the old way of existing – fighting and wars and expecting a military leader to restore the Jewish nation.....and ushering in Jesus
- Interestingly he is not a *disciple* of Jesus – he announces him, has prepared people for his coming among them, but he, like Moses (who led the Israelites to the promised land but died before entering it) does not see the fulfilment of the prophecy he is proclaiming – he stands at the edge, tantalisingly close but has to accept his calling from God was to bring many people to the point where they could see the promised Messiah and if they chose to, they could enter his Kingdom.

The reading from Isaiah for today is an outburst of pure joy in a desperate wilderness – the physical signs of life in a desert when the rains come and the stark landscape is transformed within hours – has anyone seen videos? – watering holes for animals, desert flowers blooming. The water of life. This is the new life that a belief in Jesus, God’s Messiah, God’s Son will bring to us if we let him into our hearts, let God’s Holy Spirit fill us with the love and strength and joy to overcome the wilderness we frequently find ourselves in :

- we all have doubts – about what we are to do with our lives – how is God calling us
- Am I living my life the best way I can to be called a Christian?
- How do I answer all the critics that seem to surround me within my family/ my friends/ my work colleagues?
- If there is a God why is there injustice, why is there a climate catastrophe staring us in the face with governments all over the world ignoring the need to act urgently to save it, ?
- When we pin our hopes on someone or some project and then it fails to materialise we begin to have doubts....
  - our church wasn’t awarded the lottery grant we need to fund the repair of the nave and chancel roof ...
  - the Liberal Democrats had high hopes of making a breakthrough in the General Election only to find their leader didn’t even win her own seat

....people begin to doubt whether they are focussing their attention on the right thing in the right way

- That’s when as Christians we can turn to God and pray and ask him for help and wisdom “*nothing will be impossible with God*”(Luke 1:37)
- At times like these we need to rely on our faith rather than throw up our hands in despair!
- John the Baptist was a prophet – he would be used to praying and listening to God but he was not immune to doubts....and who can blame him-
- Jesus was bringing in a radical NEW way of doing things – he was turning the world’s view upside down – he still does–
- If we follow him as his disciples he asks us to radically move out of our comfort zones– to stand up for justice through actions of peace and compassion rather than war.
- John the Baptist was old school – he couldn’t help it- God was only just appearing in the human form of Jesus to preach forgiveness of sins and a new life – to proclaim that the battle is won by an inner strength given to us by God’s Holy Spirit growing within us rather than aggression and violence, announcing that a reign of social justice for the poor was around the corner, the healing of the sick and a world where God’s love would be the overwhelming factor: including **everyone** in its transformative power.
- If we turn to Christ in prayer for reassurance, guidance and hope when we face doubts, **I believe he will reassure us** – often not directly in short sound bites “yes do this or do that” but in ways which we can only hear through humility and love and trusting in God’s mercy.
- So let us call on Christ and let our ears be unstopped and our eyes be opened as we seek to follow more closely our Saviour who is alive and reigns *with* us and *in* us and *through* us today. Amen