

SERMON: 15 December 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“Born into poverty. Changed history”

(Isaiah 35:1-10 and Matthew 11:2-11)

I start with a reflection from the StB material written for this third Sunday in Advent, the Sunday usually associated with the word ‘joy’. It’s a tonic for joylessness.

Despite our fears and anxieties, God promises joy.
Despite our loss and grief, God promises joy.

Despite our neediness and lack of resources, God promises joy.
Despite ourselves, God promises joy.

In the arid places
water will gurgle up,
in the barren places
life will sprout:

frozen wastes
of hearts and lives
will be lovingly thawed
and nurtured
and infused with joy.

We cannot stop it.
God infiltrates our best efforts and our worst
and causes joy to bubble up in the hopeless places.

However unlikely it may seem, be prepared
to experience promised joy.

Let us pray,

Loving God, may your rivers of eternal joy, come to us and flow freely in our hearts and minds, through Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Jesus was born into poverty and changed history. And the Spirit of Christ is still being born in people today and changing history one person at a time.

In this sense, the Lord is always coming.

[SLIDE] That’s what Henri Nouwen says. The Lord is coming, always coming. When you have ears to hear and eyes to see, you will recognise him

at any moment of your life. Life is Advent; life is recognising the coming of the Lord”.

Jesus came as the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy:

Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to save you. And when he comes, [SLIDE] he will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf. The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will shout and sing! (Isaiah 35:4-6).

It’s having ears to hear and eyes to see that matters. And we needed the coming of Christ to open our eyes and unstop our ears.

That’s the awesome good news of the incarnation of God with us.

Richard Rohr says this about the incarnation, the birth of Christ, Good with us.

“When we speak of Advent or preparing for Christmas, we’re not talking about waiting for a little baby to be born. We’re in fact welcoming [SLIDE] the universal, cosmic Christ—the Christ that is forever being born in the human soul and history.

Incarnation is the oldest Christian story. Through Christ, God is pouring God's self into all creation. To be Christian, then, is to see Christ in every thing.”

I confess that I didn’t always see things like that. I didn’t see Christ in every thing in the way that I’ve only quite recently began to.

Something very cosmic happened when God became flesh and dwelt among us. It wasn’t just a one off human event about one very special person being born into poverty. Something bigger happened when love came down at Christmas.

As the hymn of that name says, ‘Love was born at Christmas, Love incarnate, Love divine’.

Or the famous words of the carol Hark! The herald angels sing - ‘veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail, the Incarnate Deity’.

This is God uniting with God’s creation demonstrating, in the birth of Christ, that all of life finds its root in the love of God. Which leads to the conclusion that God loves all of life because all of life is rooted and established in love.

I don’t know why we ever made religion so exclusive.

The Coming of Christ is Good News for everyone.

In today's reading from Matthew's Gospel we find Jesus preparing his disciples and teaching and preaching in towns throughout the country.

[SLIDE] Meanwhile John the Baptist, in prison for speaking truth to power, hears what Jesus is doing and sends him a delegation to ask if he is the Messiah they've been waiting for or should they keep looking for someone else?

It sounds like John is at a bit of a turning point in his life. Is he at the point of giving up? Wondering what it's all about? Doubting that he's looking in the right place? Wondering why he's stuck in jail when things were meant to be better? Wondering why all those baptisms in the Jordan had made any difference? Wondering why it was taking so long for the Messianic revolution to begin? Wondering if his staying off the drink and his fasting had all been a waste of time?

Matthew 11:6 is rightly translated as 'blessed is the one who does not take offence at me'. The Greek word is *skandalizo* and it means to cause offence or to put a snare or a stumbling block in the way. John may not have deliberately set a trap for Jesus but whatever his motive, Jesus is determined not to be put off by what others think of him or his mission.

It can be so easy to be put off by someone else, even someone close to us. Jesus shows us here that what matters is to have a healthy sense of where God is leading you and to trust in the Way ahead even though others might question your actions or doubt your intentions.

It does sound like John might have doubted his own mission and what he was doing in preparing the way for Christ.

It can be discouraging to be working hard for something and for it to not immediately show results. That can apply to lots of things people do in life, like, planting seeds, waiting for treatment, recovering from an illness, studying for a qualification, learning a skill.

Which is why the prophetic voice of Isaiah was good news to strengthen those who had tired hands, encourage those who had weak knees and spoke to those who were afraid.

John the Baptist didn't have the luxury that we have of the full gospel story of Jesus as the Christ. We have that good news. This is maybe partly why Jesus says the even the most insignificant person in the kingdom of Heaven is greater than John (11:11).

So, two three questions to discuss as we finish:

1. How do we cope when we are in a dark place and/or have doubts/come across obstacles?
2. How might good news be shared in order to encourage those who need encouraged?
3. What else does God's living word say to us today?

[SLIDE]

Thank you God, for your Son, Jesus, who has become God with us, to love us and save us. Thank you that through Christ you are pouring love into all of creation, encouraging us when we are fearful and doubting; assuring us of your unfailing and everlasting love.