

## Advent 3 Matthew 11:2-11

This 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in advent is a time to reflect on the ministry and prophecy of John the Baptist. We reflect on John twice during the season of Advent and this can seem a little odd in light of the rest of the world focussing on the pregnancy of Mary and the birth of Jesus. But our season of advent is not just about the birth of a baby, it is about the preparation for the coming of Christ, the coming of Christ in Nazareth, the coming of Christ and his ministry and the coming of Christ promised in the future. With that in mind, prophecy is vital to our preparations and John the Baptist was the last prophet in a whole line who pointed the world to Jesus.

John the Baptist is important and last week we reflected on his prophecy before Jesus began to minister, this week we reflect on John's impression of Jesus. John had been arrested and was ultimately martyred for his faith but not before he had baptised and witnessed Jesus' ministry amongst the people. You might think that John was able to rest easy once Jesus began to preach and heal, his prophecy had been fulfilled and his purpose and calling played out. But John was not without his doubts.

Jesus did not really meet John's expectations, John preached of a winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff, a judgement of fire for those placed before the messiah. But Jesus told people to refrain from judgement, he sat with holy and unsavoury men and women alike. So unsurprisingly John worried that he had endorsed the wrong man. Just like we sometimes struggle to prayerfully discern God's purpose for us, so it was with the great saints and prophets of old. They had no more access to God than we do, they were no less prone to doubts than we are, part of living lives of faith is not necessarily knowing for certain that everything is going to plan, rather it is knowing that in everything God is at work.

So, John the Baptist got word to Jesus to explore those doubts asking, are you the one or should we be waiting for someone else? Jesus understands what John is asking and speaks to him in return using the language he understands, the language of the prophets. Jesus reminds John that they were waiting for a messiah who would make the blind see, the lame walk, cleanse lepers and so on, he confirms that he indeed fulfils the prophecies, but he does it in an unexpected way.

Jesus goes on to explain to those who were with him that John the Baptist is the greatest person ever to have lived, but that a new reality is coming, even the kingdom of heaven and in this reality even the least is greater than John. In other words, God has intervened through Jesus and everything has changed, the nature of the relationship between God and humanity is transformed.

And here is where we move back to the season of Advent. Jesus' whole life was a heavenly intervention which transformed our world and it took everyone completely by surprise. We had prophets, not just John the Baptist, centuries of prophecies, but humanity had fundamentally misunderstood the way in which God chooses to interact with humanity.

John, like those who came before him, urged the people to behave better in order to show respect to and gain the favour of God, but Jesus came and taught us about Grace.

The greatest surprise for humanity was the realisation that God already loves us. No laws kept or broken can detract from that complete and all encompassing love. That love caused God to send Jesus as a fragile and helpless baby amongst us while we were still sinners in order to show us how much we are valued. John the Baptist's whole ministry is a reminder that God is working his purpose out but that we should expect the unexpected.

That purpose is still being worked out, as mentioned at the beginning, advent is not just a time to reflect on what has gone before, but also a time to wait for what is to come. We wait on the promise of Jesus that he will come again and we should expect the unexpected. This advent can be a time of watching and waiting on God for us. We can, like John the Baptist, seek God's hand at work in our lives, we can question and prayerfully discern it, we can even doubt it but in the end we will find it where we see the fruits of the spirit being borne. Sometimes we will find those fruits in unexpected places, but where the broken are healed, the sick are cared for and the poor hear good news, there too we will find Christ' ministry through the Holy Spirit of God amongst us.

May this season of advent allow us the space to catch a glimpse of God's work in our world and may we take time to wait on God in our lives.