

**I pray that I may speak in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.**

Here we are already on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent. As Michael mentioned in this week's pews sheet this is 'Gaudete Sunday' so called as many of the readings are about the joy associated with the coming saviour. In my preparations for this sermon I was fascinated by something that Bernard of Clervaux said of Jesus' advent. He identified 3 ways in which Jesus comes to us. Firstly by his incarnation that we celebrate at Christmas and his life and mission to save humankind, then at his second coming when he will put all things right, a promise that is especially comforting for our world at this time and thirdly and more importantly for us, he comes when we invite him to our lives.

The first advent of Jesus as Emmanuel (God with us) was foretold in the prophecy of Isaiah to the Jewish Exiles 6 centuries before Jesus was born. As a man, Jesus applied this passage to himself when he read them in the synagogue in Nazareth at the start of his ministry. "The spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me". The term Sovereign Lord is only used in Isaiah's servant songs and really means "the anointed one"; Anointed by God to carry out his divine commission. Isaiah was announcing the Good News that God was going to lead his people back to Judah but of course the New Testament expands this to refer to the Good News that Jesus Christ brought Salvation to everyone.

The Messiah was coming to help the poor and bind up the broken hearted and set those free from the captivity that enslaved them and declare the year of the Lord's Favour. This was the year of Jubilee when all enslaved were set free. Jesus ended his quotation at this point but our reading from Isaiah goes on to see the transformation that takes place when we allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives giving us peace and joy even in the face of hardships and difficulties.

There will be crowns of beauty instead of ashes (referring to highly decorated head dresses or turbans that the Hebrew women had lost when Jerusalem was destroyed). There would be the Oil of Gladness (because anointing with Olive Oil was common on joyous occasions)

and they would be able to wear garments of Praise not garments of vengeance. Lastly Oaks of Righteousness would grow up as the ancient ruins that been devastated for generations were rebuilt. God would make righteousness and praise spring up. A truly amazing prophetic vision.

Today we hear from the Gospel according to John about John the Baptist's ministry. He was to prepare the way for Jesus and to testify to him. This idea of being a witness and providing a testimony is used extensively in Matthew and Luke and so here John emphasised that the facts about Jesus were amply attested and so we should through reading and hearing his gospel believe in Christ the Son of God.

However the Jewish Leaders had heard of some of the activities of John the Baptist so they sent a delegation to look into the work of this unauthorised teacher. It was the Levites who were assigned specific duties which included teaching and it was in this role that they approached John the Baptist.

As John responds to their interrogation he uses the emphatic I to say he is NOT the Christ, NOT Elijah nor a Prophet and he quotes from Isaiah 40 to explain his ministry as the voice crying in the wilderness calling people to repent and be baptised and this ministry, through the church ,has carried on to this very day.

However the Pharisees were not satisfied with this response and push him further and so John tells them that the Anointed One was coming after him although they would not recognise him. John then uses the analogy of untying sandals to highlight the difference between himself and his ministry and that of Jesus and his ministry.

The task of untying sandals was usually done by slaves, even the disciples of Rabbis who were expected to do all sorts of acts of service were not expected to have to untie sandals that have walked through the streets of that time. This highlights even more the act of washing the disciple's feet by Jesus.

John the Baptist was indeed preparing the way for Jesus and witnessing to the fact that here was that Lamb of God who takes away the Sins of the whole world. The disciples knew that it was the blood of lambs that had saved their ancestors all those centuries ago. However I doubt if the disciples really understood at that time that Jesus was the ultimate PASSOVER Lamb, not just for them but for all humanity. It was only with hindsight they realised that Jesus was God incarnate.

When Paul encourages the Thessalonians to Rejoice, he knew they were facing persecution but he also knew that Christian Joy is not dependent on Circumstances as it comes from what Christ has accomplished. The importance of regular or constant prayer was well established in the early church and Paul writes here as well as in many of his other letters that we are different to the way the world reacts to situations because we can give thanks for what God has done and we can allow the Holy Spirit's fire to warm our hearts with the love of God.

Paul speaks of not quenching the use of the gifts of the Spirit. Gifts such as prophecy and teaching need to align with the Good News and we should pray that the God of Peace will be at work in our bodies, minds and spirits, and we should be absolutely confident that God can be totally relied upon to finish what he has started. This is what marks us out as a Christian Community.

This week I was so pleased to see on Facebook that Iain Pringle and Independent State of Cuckfield with the help of the Wheatsheaf kitchen staff managed to deliver the traditional Senior Christmas Lunch to over 120 households in the community in the space of just 2 hours. Let me say thank you for all their hard work and giving us a real demonstration of the spirit of love at work in Cuckfield.

As we approach this Christmas in spite of the pandemic, let us remember the words of St Paul: 'To Rejoice in the Lord always and let our gentleness be made known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything but by prayer let our requests be known to God and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. [1147]