

Advent III 2019 (Year A)

How gently and lovingly
You wake in my heart,
Where in secret you dwell alone;
And in your sweet breathing,
Filled with good and glory,
How tenderly You swell my heart with love.

Words from a poem by St John of the Cross, about uniting one's soul to God's love. It is the most extraordinary imagery. Yesterday was the anniversary of John's death in 16th century Spain. A Castilian priest and Carmelite friar, at one point of his life he was imprisoned by his fellow monks in a tiny cell barely 10'x 6' in Toledo where he was held captive for nine months, only being brought out once a week to be publicly lashed. He had dared to seek reform of his religious order which had become worldly. His great mentor and inspiration was Teresa of Avila, who had herself undertaken this task of reform within the nunneries of the order. John's time within that tiny cell, where he had to stand on a bench in order to read his prayer book with light from a tiny window high up near the ceiling, enabled his spirituality to grow. Much of this was expressed through some of the most extraordinary and rich poetry in the Spanish language.

Today, we have another person in a cell – John the Baptist, the herald of the Messiah - whose call to repentance to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven rang in our ears last Sunday. The question he sends to Jesus may puzzle us. On the bank of the River Jordan he has pointed to Jesus and said, *'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.'* Has he sent his own disciples so that they too will have their hearts strengthened in meeting the Lord? Have doubts arisen in John's own mind? If he has doubts, could it be that his vision of the Messiah together with his terrifying message of fire and judgement doesn't fit with Jesus the Nazorean carpenter who is happy to eat with sinners and tax collectors. Certainly Jesus's Messiahship seems completely at odds with the imagery John has understood from the Old Testament prophets. Has he created a mental prison of his own in his expectations of the Messiah?

The response of Jesus is to draw on the richness of Scripture himself – using the Isaiah passage we heard just now: *'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'*

Is the latter sentence a gentle rebuke to John? However, the most important part of this reply is a call for these disciples to go and tell John what they hear and see. They are called to be apostles of the Kingdom to the forerunner himself. They are called to look at the world in a new way – to see and proclaim a world transformed. This is a world where life in Jesus does indeed bring sight to the blind, enables the lame to walk within his love, brings true healing to lepers and the wonder of sight to the blind. New life in Jesus Christ is offered to all, no matter what their circumstances.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, 'Don't think, but look!' (matching Carl Jung's 'Don't judge, but perceive!'). Wittgenstein asks us to consider things as they are in each case and not as we think of them as they should be or as we might believe them to be through cursory experience. We are to explore the reality of what we believe and encounter within our lives in order to engage as fully as we can. Experience enables us to shape what we know and believe, open to new understanding without weighing things down with our own baggage. Of course this is not an uncomplicated manner or method of perceiving the world, yet in Jesus, we are called to look in a way which transforms our understanding of our experiences, both painful and joyful or even plain humdrum. All invite us with the opportunity to see God as present or at work within life, together with the knowledge of the mysterious abiding of God with us on our journey.

Time and time again, the Jewish people endured terrible suffering and a seeming exclusion from the light of God's presence. Carted off to Babylonian exile, numerous people executed, the Temple in ruins – everything must have seemed as bleak as imaginable. Yet Isaiah, in ecstatic vision, talks of a world transformed in acknowledging God's present love even in the bleakest situations: *Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.'* Even the use of language which talks of vengeance and recompense seems to me to deal with God's ability to break through our own barriers and prejudices, seeking to cast them aside as we allow ourselves to be open to his light through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Advent is a time when we are called to consider how we too might break out of our own self-made prison cells – the walls we ourselves erect - which separate us from understanding God's grace at work within our lives. Faith in Jesus Christ is not designed to make our lives cushy feather beds of life. Rather it is a call to live life ever more **deeply**, secure in the knowledge that God is with us in every situation. Through this we learn the depth of God's love as we serve the world; searching out the lost, the least and the left-behind (and no, that is not a political slogan!). Jesus the Messiah turns the world upside-down – we are called to find strength in our weakness, to love our enemies and tear down the walls of bigotry, hatred and division, even if it costs us dearly. In doing so, our own prison walls begin to tumble down and the very doors we ourselves have locked from the inside open, and the light of Christ floods the darkness which we have created within ourselves.

We are called to look and see – to behold the world through the eyes of faith. This leads us to the reality and fulness of life lived through faith. John proclaimed, *'Repent because the kingdom of God has come near.'*

Origen, one of the early Fathers of the Church wrote, *'The kingdom of heaven is Jesus Christ himself, who calls all people to repentance and draws them to himself by love.'*

John of the Cross discovered in that tiny cell in Toledo that even in terrible suffering he was accompanied by the crucified one and loved beyond measure by God. Let us, on

³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.'
⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,^[a]
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
⁸ A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,^[b]
but it shall be for God's people;^[c]
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.
⁹ No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
¹⁰ And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

James 5: 7-10

⁷ Be patient, therefore, beloved,^[a] until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.^[b] ⁹ Beloved,^[c] do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, beloved,^[d] take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Matthew 11: 2-11

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' ⁴ Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'
⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."
¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.