

Jesus's Kingdom ...

... of Presence and Love

A sermon given on the Third Sunday of Advent, 11th Decmber 2022 – by the Associate Vicar, the Revd Wendy Wale, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 11:2-11

We all have ideas in our heads about Christmas. Being located here in East Yorkshire we probably have images of cold; perhaps snow; of trees; christmas trees; many, many christmas trees [*Ed: today is the last day of the Christmas Tree Festival in the Minster - 120 trees, beautifully decorated by their sponsors from around the town and county*]; and of sparkle; presents; food; family; the baby in the manger. Many of our images are formed from childhood christmases; some perhaps from television adverts; some from nativities and carol services; and from the stories that get passed down year on year: like the time my nanny left the Yorkshire puddings in the oven, which was a tragedy. We tend to remember the best ones; the funny ones; the ones with laughter; people and joy - the world as we wish it to be.

However, we are only too aware that for countless people, christmas is a dark and difficult time: cold indeed, with no money to keep the heating on; trees, all speaking of community, when so many feel isolated and alone; sparkle, washing over the tears and grief; presents that the children long for and the credit card refuses; food generously donated from the food bank; and the family memories of those we've lost, those who have left and those we'd rather forget.

Then there's the baby in the manger: the one who grew up with the hopes of the world upon his shoulders; the conquering hero who was going to overthrow the oppressive ruling regime; bring justice in an unjust world; the hopes of his followers that they would like to see the world as the image in their head.

However, the reality is far from what is imagined. John the Baptist, whose glorious story we heard of last week, is in prison for holding on to his integrity (his bold declaration of the Messiah to come after him), feeling hollow and empty, his life hanging on by a thread. It's not surprising that he sends a message to Jesus saying, "*Are you really the one who is to come? Or should we wait for somebody else?*"

This is not the Jesus that John had in his head; this is not the story he had imagined for himself; this is not the glory train.

Jesus reminded John of what he had seen: the blind receiving their sight; the lame walking; the lepers cleansed; the deaf hearing; the dead raised; the poor having good news brought to them; the marks of the kingdom of God being close at hand; the signs of good news. And then Jesus says to his followers, "*Were you expecting somebody from the palace? Somebody wearing royal robes?*" And in a sense, that is what they were expecting: somebody who would combat corrupt power with good power. The storyline of every action movie is what I imagine we all long to see: wrongs put right; the mighty brought down; the controllers overthrown and justice reigning.

Of course, ultimately, this was what Jesus came to do, but not in the way that anyone could imagine - triumphant heroes don't have their heads chopped off and served on a platter like John or get strung up on a cross like Jesus.

Jesus's kingdom is a kingdom of presence and love. Jesus came to suffer with his world to experience the pain of exclusion, loss, disability, rejection, grief and torture. Jesus didn't come into the midst of sparkle, but in an animals' feeding trough. Jesus came to show that God's love is not distant and remote, but found in the midst of the depths of human suffering, vulnerability, tangible and ever present. Jesus's triumph over death bought the ultimate freedom, the promise of hope and a future.

And so this Advent season as we continue to watch and wait for Jesus's return to bring the ultimate restoration, may we be those who look now for the signs of his kingdom, for how we can be part of that restoration. And as we draw closer to celebrating the birth of the baby in the manger, may we love the people he loved; may we walk with the broken; heal the sick; bring comfort to the broken hearted; seek justice for the oppressed; and work to bring change for the poor in body, mind and spirit.

We have all these ideas in our heads about Christmas. May it be a joyful one for you and all you humankind.

Reading Text

Matthew 11:2-11

²When 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.