



SUNDAY 11 DECEMBER 2022

DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

The Parishes of: Bishop Auckland || Newton Aycliffe & Shildon || Willington
Crook, Tow Law & Wolsingham || Tudhoe || Coundon, Ferryhill & Windlestone

ESCOMB PARTNERSHIP NOTE

3rd Sunday of Advent (Year A) Matthew 11: 2-11

We were talking about Advent. This Sunday we light the pink Advent candle. 'It's Gaudete Sunday'. Andrea pointed out. 'It's a day to rejoice at the approaching feast of Christmas. You could read Kevin's reaction in his face. He thought there was not much to rejoice about this year.

The readings at Mass are challenging. Isaiah the prophet talks of the desert bursting into bloom, blind people seeing again, lame folks dancing and those with no voice singing their hearts out. Is it all a pipe dream? It's a way of lifting the spirits of a deported people and to give them a hopeful picture of God coming to save them. Like Kevin, the people thought there was nothing to get excited about. It was hard to pierce their depression.

Advent is a time to think. To put the kettle on and sit down for some time to ponder for however long or short a spell you have. You may want to do it more than once. The gold standard is finding time each day.

Why should we rejoice? What's to look forward to? In fact, we're looking both ways at once - backwards and straight ahead. Like Isaiah's audience, we need to be reassured. God has not abandoned us and never will. When no one listens any more, God does. The conversations we initiate with him we call prayer. It's in these times with him we learn about hope. Rehearse our fears, joys, sorrows, doubts and grumbles and all the times we search for meaning and sense - it's the forum for ideas and for knowing stubbornly that, despite appearances, someone cares. It's also a testing time.

The great John the Baptist was even starting to wonder if Jesus was God's answer to the longings of the people. Like John, we can have expectations of what signs we think God should give. But Jesus was not the identikit picture of the Messiah John had in mind. He's not coming with power to sort out and punish but to identify with vulnerable humanity and to heal. We are understood and loved. What we go through, he goes through with us. His life paints an assertive picture - our God is living among us and it's his decision.

Jesus goes further still. He calls John the greatest born of woman - what a belting thing to say! And yet - he goes on, the Kingdom of his Father that Jesus comes to establish admits the smallest and least likely. Jesus doesn't estimate greatness by human standards. He once set a little child in front of his disciples and punctured their aspirations to greatness by telling them this youngster is the greatest in the kingdom. Greatness is defined by attentively serving others. What a turnaround.

Like John the Baptist, we're learning still. God is God beyond our ideas about him.
It is time to rejoice!



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A word from Pope Francis

God is eternal newness. He impels us constantly to set out anew, to pass beyond what is familiar, to the fringes and beyond. He takes us to where humanity is most wounded, where men and women, beneath the appearance of a shallow conformity, continue to seek an answer to the question of life's meaning. God is not afraid! He is fearless! He is always greater than our plans and schemes. Unafraid of the fringes, he himself became a fringe (*cf. Philippians 2:6-8; John 1:14*). So if we dare to go to the fringes, we will find him there; indeed, he is already there. Jesus is already there, in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, in their wounded flesh, in their troubles and in their profound desolation. He is already there.

True enough, we need to open the door of our hearts to Jesus, who stands and knocks (*cf. Revelation 3:20*). Sometimes I wonder, though, if perhaps Jesus is already inside us and knocking on the door for us to let him escape from our stale self-centeredness. In the Gospel, we see how Jesus 'went through the cities and villages, preaching and bringing good news of the kingdom of God' (*Luke 8:1*). After the resurrection, when the disciples went forth in all directions, the Lord accompanied them (*cf. Mark 16:20*). This is what happens as the result of true encounter.

Complacency is seductive; it tells us that there is no point in trying to change things, that there is nothing we can do, because this is the way things have always been and yet we always manage to survive. By force of habit we no longer stand up to evil. We 'let things be', or as others have decided they ought to be. Yet let us allow the Lord to rouse us from our torpor, to free us from our inertia. Let us rethink our usual way of doing things; let us open our eyes and ears, and above all our hearts, so as not to be complacent about things as they are, but unsettled by the living and effective word of the risen Lord.

- Rejoice and be Glad paras 135-137