Sunday Morning Resources

15th December 2019, 3rd Sunday of Advent, Year A

**Lectionary Readings** (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you must use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

Isaiah 35. 1-10
Psalm 146. 4-10, or Canticle: Magnificat
James 5. 7-10
Matthew 11. 2-11

**Background notes** Although the homily focuses mainly on the gospel reading, it is well worth your while, as the worship leader, to look at the whole lectionary provision before doing further planning. **Background notes have been provided at the end of this Sunday Morning Resource to give more information on the readings.**

**Homily**

Today’s homily has been written by Rev'd Dr Jenny Gage, Minister for Social Justice at Ely Cathedral, and Bishop’s Officer for Self-supporting Ministry

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Imagine John the Baptist sitting in prison, wondering: Is this it? Or is there something, or someone else still to come? Perhaps he was expecting Jesus to be more like himself, so started to wonder if he’d been mistaken all this time. Perhaps it was just that he knew his own chances of getting out alive were pretty slim, and so he wanted to be sure that there was someone to carry on the work he’d started.

We can’t know what was in John’s mind, but we can think about his question for ourselves: Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another? Is Jesus the one for us? What difference does his birth make to our world, 2000 years on?

We can be sure that Jesus made a difference in his own time, and many of us know that he makes a difference now in our time. But the claim that the gospels and the New Testament generally make is that he made all the difference in the world. God’s decisive act happened through Jesus, there is no one else to come, because he is the one.

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But we know full well that life does not yet conform to that vision that we read about in the prophets. Isaiah said that the time would come when everything would be transformed: the deserts would blossom with streams of cool water, flowing through them; those who are weak and fearful will become strong and confident; the blind will see, the deaf will hear, and those who cannot walk will leap like deer.

We look around us and think, hmm … it doesn’t look like we’re there yet.

But wait a minute. Every week, we pray “Thy kingdom come on earth as in heaven”. Through these words, we’re affirming that it is here on earth that the kingdom of God will come into being. And every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we are praying for it to happen here and now.

When John asked the question, Jesus’ response was to point to what was happening right then and there: people were being healed, and the poor were hearing good news. It was already happening.

And it is still happening! For those who are prepared to hear and to see, the kingdom is already present in our midst.

Think for a moment of where you’ve seen evidence of the kingdom of God recently. Maybe you’ve seen people who were at odds come together again. Maybe you’ve seen someone who was ill, or distressed, regain their health, and their peace of mind. Maybe you’ve seen someone receive the kind of good news which makes all the difference.

1 A few weeks ago, a man in Florida heard that there were more than 400 children in his community who were being refused a proper lunch at school because their parents owed money to the school. So, he gave the district schools enough money to pay off these debts. When other people heard about this, together they started a fund to ensure that students won’t be hungry in future.

That’s an example of good news for the poor – and it’s evidence for the kingdom of God at work here on earth right now.

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1 Substitute a suitable story of your own here if possible.
Volunteers in London visit the elderly and housebound, and exercise with them. It helps prevent falls, and of course, it’s also a chance for both to enjoy a bit of company and prevent loneliness.

That’s also an example of the kingdom of God at work here on earth right now. Once we’ve tuned into it, so we know what we’re looking for, then we spot God at work all over the place.

We can respond by becoming part of that work. We can be part of God’s kingdom here on earth, just like the man who made sure that children in his locality weren’t going hungry, and like the volunteers who help lonely, housebound people to stay as mobile as possible and to feel that they matter to someone. We can all do something: none of us is too old, too sick or too useless, unless we really are at death’s door.

Chances are you’re already doing plenty, but we can all be on the look-out for ways to serve those in need around us, so helping to establish God’s kingdom here on earth.

And then we will be part of those whom Jesus calls the least in the kingdom of heaven: ordinary people, just like you and me, who walk with Jesus, following his way, showing our faith through our care for others. The way has been prepared, it is open before us. Let us follow in it.

Amen

Suggested intercessions

Loving God, be in our midst as we pray for our world, for our church, and for ourselves.

We pray for people everywhere who struggle with the basic necessities of enough food, enough clothing, enough warmth. We know that in many parts of the world, families struggle to provide so much that we take for granted. In our own locality, we know that there are those who lack proper shelter, warmth and enough food. We pray for them.

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer

We pray for the needs of the church worldwide, especially Christians in places where there is acute poverty or unrest and where peace is but a dream ... [insert a relevant example]. We pray too for our own church, remembering today all those who give time or money to

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help others, especially ... [insert those who volunteer for projects that help others and require prayer in your church].

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer

We pray for all people everywhere who are working to help us all live in peace on this earth. We particularly pray for all who care about climate justice, and who work to alleviate problems caused by climate change.

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer

We pray for people in need, especially ... [insert as appropriate]

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer

We remember too those who have died, especially ... [insert as appropriate]. We pray too for people who die alone or in great pain, and for all whose death is untimely.

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer

Loving God, we ask that you will sensitise us to see you at work in our daily lives. Help us to see you in the faces of those who meet. Help us to be Christ to those who need to feel his love for them; help us to accept the help of others when we need it. May we be faithful servants, ever ready to point to you, to say “Jesus is the one, and he is here present with us, working in this place.”

Merciful Father,
accept these prayers for the sake of your son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen
Suggested hymns/songs

- Christ is the world’s true light
- Come thou long-awaited Jesus
- Hail to the Lord’s anointed
- Hark, a thrilling voice is sounding
- Hark the glad sound! the Saviour comes
- Hills of the North, rejoice
- Jesus shall reign where’er the sun
- Joy to the world, the Lord is come
- Lo he comes with clouds descending
- Rejoice the Lord is king
- Teach me my God and king
- Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord
- The people that in darkness walked
- Thy kingdom come, O God
- You (ye) servants of God, your Master proclaim
- You shall go out with joy

Background notes:

**Isaiah 35.1-10:**

This passage contains a beautiful poetic evocation of God’s intention for creation. Include it if you can, so that the congregation can enjoy the vision it conjures up. In less than a fortnight, we shall be celebrating the birth of the Messiah. Marvel that centuries ago, a prophet could paint such a lovely picture of what it might mean for the glory of God to be revealed to all.

There are five pictures of salvation: the transformation of the wilderness, the longing of those who are feeble, tired and fearful to know that God is coming, the transformation of all who are physically limited, the transformation of the hot dry desert, and the holy highway along which God’s people will safely return to Zion.

**Psalm 146.4-10:**

These verses contain yet another image of salvation, this time expressed as liberation for people suffering oppression, hunger, imprisonment, and those who are blind, or bowed down – both these could be either physical or spiritual or both. It is good news for the righteous, the stranger, the orphan and the widow. We cannot save ourselves, and salvation will not come from human leaders, but God will never fail those who are in any kind of need.

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The Magnificat:

Luke 1-2 contains words which have been preserved for us in four early Christian hymns, which we now know as Canticles: the Magnificat (1.46-55), the Benedictus (1.68-79), the Gloria (2.14), and the Nunc Dimittis (2.29-32).

The Magnificat is magnificently subversive, with its call to pull down the mighty and exalt the lowly. It has been declared illegal by at least one right-wing Latin American government in the past. In it, Mary praises God that he has lifted her up and blessed her, despite her lowliness. She then celebrates the political and economic liberation of the oppressed and poor which Jesus’ birth brings about.

It is those who are aware of their need who are most free to hear this message. We need to beware of sanitising Mary’s words – they are radical. It isn’t that you have to be poor and oppressed for God to come to you, but if you are rich and comfortable, as most of us are, in real world terms, we are far less likely to heed his call and respond to it – we may not recognise our need for God, but believe instead in our own independence. Then instead of using what we have to free ourselves for service, the temptation is to pile up more stuff, more money, to ensure the situation doesn’t change. And then it’s hard for us to hear the real fire in what Mary says. This has become known as the “preferential option for the poor” or the “bias towards the poor” – there’s nothing new about liberation theology!

Mary was saying that the child she would bear would change everything, not to turn things upside down, but to turn them the right way up – in God’s eyes, if not in ours. Richard Rohr (look him up, he’s written much that’s worth reading) says that “white, middle-class males are one of the hardest groups to preach the gospel to. Why would they want to talk about conversion and change? Why would we guys want to change anything? We’re enjoying it. We’ve got everything.” Even Jesus had more success with the poor and needy than with the rich, powerful men of his time.

The verb tenses used in the Magnificat express timeless truths – things which are not strictly past, present or future, but always appropriate and true. The reversal of the powerful for the powerless is already visible in God’s choice of Mary to bear his Son.

James 5.7-10

It seems that James’ readers/hearers were getting impatient for the return of the Lord, so he counsels patience. Just as the farmer knows that although there is nothing to see in the field yet, the seeds will grow, and the time of harvest will come.

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3 The names come from the Latin for the first words of each hymn, because they have formed part of the church’s liturgy from earliest times.

Matthew 11.2-11

John the Baptist’s question: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” is a vehicle for Jesus’ explanation of who he is, and how people will know that he really is the Messiah. Jesus doesn’t go into detail about his identity, instead he presents his credentials in terms of what the effects are of his ministry. By putting what you hear before what you see, it may be that Matthew is saying that it is only once you’ve accepted what Jesus says as the word of God that you will recognise in what he does the evidence for it.

The signs of the kingdom are that people are healed of their physical infirmities and the poor receive good news. This picks up what Mary said in the Magnificat. These signs should not be spiritualised away – the kingdom brings physical relief as well as spiritual.

The real question is not who does Jesus think he is, but what does it mean for each of us that God has inaugurated something new in and through Jesus.

Jesus then goes on to talk about John the Baptist, quoting from the prophet Isaiah. The words Jesus used are not the same as in our English translations of the Hebrew scriptures, because the version Jesus knew was probably a Greek version translated into the Aramaic that he and those with him spoke. Nevertheless, Jesus specifically identified John the Baptist with the messenger who would announce the coming of the Messiah.

The final verse is not to deny prophets, or John the Baptist in particular, a place in the kingdom of heaven, but to say that anyone who believes will be there, and even someone of John’s stature won’t be in a more privileged place.