

Joy in the rain

MUC Fellowship@10, 14 December 2025

Alison Sampson, reflecting on Matthew 11:2-11

The saddest funeral I ever did was for a young woman who died by suicide. She attended a local church which was very high energy. However, it did not do funerals and certainly not for suicide. Trying to find a pastor who would hold a service for their daughter, her distraught parents were eventually given my name.

Why wouldn't the other church do funerals? I'm given to understand it was a happy-clappy end times mob. They believed Jesus had defeated death once and for all and that his second coming was imminent. From this they had concluded there would be no sickness, no suffering, no mourning and no dying before his arrival. As ubiquitous as they are, these things were considered to be evidence of failure and sin, and so they were rejected. Thus all was glory, glory, hallelujah and breathless anticipation as the church shunned suffering members and lived on in wilful denial.

It's certainly one way to anticipate the coming of the Lord.

In this season of Advent, we talk a lot about anticipation. We speak of the coming Messiah, and God's new creation, and a world made new. We pray 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.' We claim to live in the resurrection and the power of the spirit which transcends even death, and we sing of peace on earth and goodwill to all. Then we go home and see the chasm between the claims of faith and our wounded world. People are suffering, people are dying, and our hearts are all too often broken. Hope, peace, joy, love: are we for real? Or is this just fantasy? Is there something in the promises of Christmas, or are we, too, living in wilful denial? Are we simply filling our heads with charming tales and hollow claims while turning our backs on reality?

The prophet John may have been asking himself similar questions. Last week, we heard how he had galvanised the crowds. They came pouring out of the cities and towns, away from established institutions and religious gatekeepers. Down by the river, in a wild, unregulated space, they turned to God, confessed sin, and changed their lives: and they gratefully accepted the water bath which washed their shame away. As John baptised them, he thundered against those religious leaders who abuse their power and harm

people's faith, and he pointed to the coming one who would burn all the rubbish. For a little while, everything was awesome. But his scathing critiques of the powerful landed John in prison.

There, rumours reached him. Jesus was on the move, and so were his disciples. People were talking of the Messiah. Yet there were no lightning bolts, no flamethrowers, no incineration of towns. There was no winnowing of individuals from the crowd, no striking people down or casting people out for their faithlessness. There were no earthquakes, no floods, no cataclysms, no army, and any miracle seemed to involve very ordinary things. The Messiah was supposed to lead the revolution, liberating Israel from its oppressors and restoring it to the Jewish people. Instead, he brought love.

Love, and mercy, and hospitality, and healing, and countless conversations and stories. It was strange and countercultural and thoroughly unimpressive, not what was expected from the Messiah at all.

Meanwhile, Jesus' disciples were pretty ordinary. They weren't religious ascetics, like John. They hadn't spent their lives in a desert enclave rejecting simple comforts and mortifying the body. Nor were they religious leaders or even guerrilla fighters. Instead they were fishermen, tax collectors and other despised people. They got things wrong and messed things up and argued constantly. They were ambivalent about children and blocked others from Jesus and failed to understand what he was on about again and again and again.

So John sent a message: 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?' Like, are you serious? Because how could someone this local, this humble, surrounded by people so flawed, be the saviour the world is waiting for? And given the Messiah is supposed to be the liberator, then why am I still in prison?

These are great questions, and they echo through the ages. We live in another moment of the story, yet still we might wonder: is this really it? Because if we're waiting for someone to overthrow the world through force, or if we're waiting for a time when everything and everyone will be shiny-perfect and nobody will have scars, then it seems we're going to be waiting a very long time.

In response to John's question, Jesus didn't answer directly. Instead, he pointed to what was happening. To paraphrase his own paraphrase of Isaiah, 'The oblivious are finally getting it. The immobilised are filled with energy.'

The outcast are being embraced. The unheeding are paying attention. The zombified are waking up to life, and the good news is shared with the poor. And blessed is anyone who isn't scandalised by me.' In other words he's saying, 'These are the fruits of my ministry: people are being healed. They're embracing faith, they're embracing life, they're embracing each other. Fractured hurting rejected people are being integrated into community. It's good news for the sick and the suffering, the disabled, the marginalised, the poor. Am I the coming one? You decide.'

So Jesus lays it on us to reflect on what sort of Messiah we're waiting for, and we're to decide, not through convoluted theological arguments, but through examining the fruit of faith. What, then, is salvation? And what does it look like for the world to be made whole? What fruit are we looking for?

Does it look like rejecting the reality of death and those who experience it? Does it mean living in denial? Does it involve further marginalisation for those who suffer as they are cast from our midst? Well, no. That's not a world made whole; it's a world made hollow.

Alternatively, does it mean participating in never-ending cycles of violence as we try to implement the kingdom of heaven by force, and are resisted by force, and go at it hammer and tongs until the land is laid waste and all the people are dead or devastated by PTSD? Again, no. That's not a world made whole; it's a world made horrific.

So could it mean what Jesus is offering: the integration of all people, but particularly the most vulnerable, into community? And could this integration be a sign and forerunner of the peaceable kingdom imagined by Isaiah, or the cosmic communion envisioned by Paul? And if it is, then we do we see glimpses of it even now?

For those of us wondering if Jesus is the real deal, I suggest that this then is our task: to look around at what is being embodied by the faithful, then decide.

The oblivious will get it; the zombified will wake up to life. So do we see people growing, changing their minds, and recognising the priority of love? Are people awake to the ongoing power and relevance of the gospel? Are they turning from other gods, other values, and allowing Christ to shape their lives? And are their – our – words and actions good news to the poor and spiritually impoverished?

The lepers are healed; the outcast are embraced. So are people who bear the brunt of the world's scorn – the sick, the suffering, the aging, the dying, the grieving, and those who know frailty in body and mind – are they centred? Are they treated with dignity, ensured of agency, cared for with gentleness? Do they have a people to belong to and a place to contribute? Do they know how much they matter?

And do we see a diverse community where people of varying capacities, abilities and beliefs aren't shunned but are integrated into one body? And, perhaps, do our words and actions and the people we spend time with scandalise and offend some onlookers?

If the answer to these and similar questions is mostly 'yes', then I reckon we're onto something. That is, I reckon Jesus is the real deal, because faith in him is leading the faithful to be a sign of the peaceable kingdom and a glimpse of the cosmic communion. It's a beautiful reality where everyone has a place. But as John's life and indeed Jesus' life show, even the greatest faithfulness does not necessarily lead to popularity or success, at least, not in this life. Put bluntly, we might be doing everything right, yet our lives might feel small and underwhelming; our efforts might seem futile; we might receive pushback; our future might be uncertain. This is to be expected.

For we are in Advent: a time of unsettled and unsettling expectations, poised as we are between our present reality and our future hope. We can trust that God is already working within us and among us and through us, for we are already a sign of things to come, even as we wait for the fullness of the arrival of God-with-us, Immanuel.

So while we are watching and waiting and preparing, let us continue in our work. Let us keep caring for one another. Let us keep making space for people of all ages, all stages, all capacities and all experiences to participate in our common life. Let us keep proclaiming the good news of God's healing and embrace. And let us keep sharing and receiving the gifts of love through life's travails. For it is not through denial but through entering into the shadows that we receive the true gifts of Christmas: hope in the dark, peace in the pain, joy in the rain. In the name of Jesus, Immanuel, God-with-us, we pray: Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen. Ω