

Isaiah 35. 1-10

Luke 1. 46b - 55

James 5. 7 - 10

Matthew 11. 2 - 11

This week and last week our gospel readings have involved John the Baptist. Last week as John was baptising out by the Jordan river we heard him say of Jesus: *one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.* Frightening stuff really.

This week, as we are halfway through Matthew's gospel, Jesus' ministry is established, and John has been locked up in prison by Herod for his fierce denouncement of Herod's behaviour. John has been hearing accounts of Jesus' ministry and not everything he hears accords with the violent images of chaff burnt with unquenchable fire. So he sends his disciples to find out more. John has a particular image of the Messiah: fierce, uncompromising, probably violent. But this is not what John's disciples are reporting to him about Jesus. Jesus says to John's disciples when they ask him: Are you the one to come – or are we to wait for another?

'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.'

There is a strange contrast between John's certainty at the time of Jesus' baptism and the way that the ministry of Jesus – the anointed one – is unfolding. This title "the anointed one" goes to the heart of the nature of who Jesus is and what his ministry looks like. The title Messiah is a Jewish term and means *anointed one*; a title that identifies the one anointed with God's spirit. The title of Christ is not actually Jesus' surname, rather, simply, the ancient Greek word for anointed one. When we say Jesus Christ we are saying: Jesus – the anointed one. Messiah and Christ are interchangeable Jewish and Greek titles meaning the same thing.

The essential importance of these titles is that they say that Jesus is anointed with the spirit of God. He is named Son of God because of what he shows us of the character of God. He is the lens through which we see and understand God. This is the church's proclamation. This goes to the heart of what we proclaim and celebrate at Christmas.

This anointing of Jesus takes place in various ways through each of the gospels. At its most obvious is the descent of the dove and anointing with the Spirit at Jesus' baptism and the voice from heaven: 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' It is the Gospel writers' way of pointing to the divine mandate for Jesus' ministry; and the character of that ministry. In Luke's Gospel there is a sign of the character of this ministry when Jesus emerges from his testing in the wilderness, and returns to his home town and attends the synagogue on the sabbath. He reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

It's Luke's way of saying: now Jesus is anointed with the Spirit, this is what it will look like.

But there is also another anointing which takes place. There is a woman in each of the gospels, sometimes named Mary, sometimes with no name, who makes her way into a banquet – an all-male banquet - and anoints Jesus with costly perfume, outraging the pious. My sense of what happens in this anointing is that this woman recognises Jesus and anoints him because of what he has shown of the nature of God. Anointing is a highly symbolic act in Jesus' world and what she does is audacious, overflowing with unabashed love for Jesus. It is the act of a human recognising the presence of God.

In today's gospel, when Jesus says to John's disciples, go back to John in prison and tell him what you have seen: 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.' He echoes those words from the prophet Isaiah heard in Luke: *because he has anointed me ... This is what I will do, because God has anointed me.*

Like John though, like all of us, we often get confused about what Jesus is on about. Maybe at one extreme of our very human confusion is the fiery, chaff burning, causer-of-teeth-gnashing Jesus and at the other extreme is the cutesy baby asleep in the hay, no-crying-he-makes Jesus. Gentle Jesus meek and mild. We know for too much of church history that rulers and regimes and religious zealots have sought to enlist a violent Jesus in their projects. From crusaders in the middle ages, the religiously certain burning witches and others at the stake, to the inquisition and in our own time those with family values wanting to control the lives of others, insisting that Jesus is on their side. And at the other end of the spectrum when we follow a gentle Jesus meek and mild Jesus and insist that religion is just a private matter we render the gospel powerless.

John's disciples come to Jesus as he is performing his public ministry. What he is doing is not private religion business but a ministry with public implications. He is touching and redeeming those who are meant to be invisible, those considered to be the inevitable collateral damage of the way Jesus' society works. The blind, the lame, the untouchable ones, the deaf and the poor are made visible as the kingdom comes close. But this is not a Messiah who is expected, he is not welcome by the powerful. Jesus says to the crowd after he has sent John's disciples back to him: *And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me. Blessed are those who don't see me as a stumbling block. Jesus knows his ministry is offensive, a stumbling block. We know it is the offensiveness of this ministry which brings him to crucifixion.*

This month in Crosslight there is an interview with the Rev. Brendan Byrne, minister in this Presbytery at Heathmont Uniting Church. Brendan has a particular concern for the nature of work in our contemporary society and the issue of poverty and class. We don't much talk about class in Australia. At one level we pride ourselves as Australians that we are a classless society, having left the strictures of the British class system behind.

Brendan says that our society does have a system of class based upon our economic status and that we live by a valuing of human worth based upon that economic status. His concern is that our trenchantly middle-class church has nothing to say in the public sphere about this issue; that, while as a church at one level we are deeply committed to justice issues, we have abandoned the poor and the economic and social systems which cause poverty keeping people trapped there. In doing this we have abandoned Jesus' ministry of restoring people's human dignity; of restoring the image of God which all people bear.

Brendan says in the interview: *I think that the stripping of human dignity on a daily basis is deeply embedded in economic injustice. "What makes it worse is that our economic orthodoxy is reframed as a meritocracy, so that if you are wealthy and successful and can access material, cultural and educational resources, it's because you deserve to, because you are a morally decent and upright person.*

"And it's an economic orthodoxy that also wrongly suggests if you are unemployed, if you are poor, if you don't have access to those resources, it's because you're lazy and spend your money on alcohol, or gambling, or whatever, and you effectively deserve, not just to be poor, but to be punished for being poor."

We have heard this mindset in political rhetoric in the last five to ten years – about being lifters, not leaners. That you will get a go, if you have a go. And if you don't – well you get what you deserve.

We saw this divide in stark relief as the pandemic took hold and the vulnerability of those people in manual and menial work who were quickly exposed to the ravages of the virus because of the nature of their work. But we relied on them; heavily. We know now that they make our society go round; they bear us up in our daily lives. They were without the luxury of being salaried and being able to suddenly retreat to working behind closed doors, isolated from other humans.

As we approach the stable – the smelly stable – with the poor couple fleeing the social stigma of Mary the unwed mother – we tell this story about God appearing in this offensive, scandalous place, honouring this poor couple, redeeming them and their lowly status. It is coming into the world of God which puts flesh on the longings of the prophets

Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!

This aligning with the poor comes to fruition in Mary's Magnificat:

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

In Matthew's Gospel in the sermon on the mount Jesus says: blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. As we move toward Christmas, we move toward a celebration of

God coming to us in our places of poverty – weather tangible, empty-belly poverty or poverty of spirit. We are invited to recognise these places in ourselves and each other. To look on ourselves with the same eyes of compassion God sees us with and to pray: Come Lord Jesus; come, Lord Jesus. And to be watchful and ready. May it be so.

Andrew Boyle