

## Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> December 2022: Advent 3: 'The joy of the redeemed' (Isaiah 35:1-10)

Nobody likes waiting. I think we can say that's pretty much a universal trait of human nature. I certainly don't. I never have. When I was young my dad was always the last to be ready, and the rest of us would often have to wait by the door for him, fidgeting and fretting and muttering under our breath. As I've got older, it turns out that I've inherited this rather annoying trait (as my family will attest) – and I know *why* as well. I don't like waiting.

I've been privileged to take a lot of school Advent and Christmas assemblies over the last two weeks – it's always slightly disorientating to give my first Christmas message at the end of November! – and one of the things I've got the children to think about is waiting. Most of them are very excited about Christmas, so they understand what it feels like to be waiting for something good to happen.

I've been asking them this week if there's anything good that can come out of waiting, and it's been wonderful to see the wisdom of children. Given a few seconds to think about it, they hit the nail on the head every time: they talk about being more **thankful** for what we have as well as what we're waiting for, they talk about learning **patience**, and they also admit that the good thing is even **more exciting** if they've waited for it.

Today's passage is kind of like a 'greatest hits' of Advent themes. If I'd been able to decide what the set texts were for Advent 2022, I would have planned this one to come at the beginning or the end of the season; but as it happens it comes slap bang in the middle – we're exactly two weeks from the start of Advent and exactly two weeks from Christmas Day – so maybe that's not such a bad place to have it, after all.

In a moment we'll see why it's a 'greatest hits' passage: but let's begin by remembering that **all of these glorious passages we enjoy at Advent come in a context of waiting**. In fact, the waiting of the people of God puts my fidgeting by the front door into some kind of perspective. Isaiah received these visions in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, more than 700 years before Jesus was born. That's a lot of waiting that lies ahead.

But here, in this passage, we see all of the themes that came to define what we now put into our Advent season of waiting – Isaiah 35 begins with **a message of hope: (v1)** 'The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus it will burst into bloom.' Whatever life looks like now, Isaiah promises, a season of renewal is coming. Like the first flowers after winter, something new is on its way. Advent starts with hope because that is where all productive waiting must start. Hope, as we've seen, is the confident expectation that something good is coming, that things will be better than they are now. And for Isaiah, even the desert is not beyond redemption – new life can make even that parched land flourish.

**What comes next is peace (v3).** 'Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear, your God will come.' As hope lifts our spirits, so we find a new emotion stirring in our hearts. Fear gives way to peace, *because we know that our God will come*. As most of the children in my assemblies this week know that presents await them in two weeks time, so we too know that God will come – the greatest gift of all.

And **that knowledge manifests itself in joy: (v5)** 'Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.' This famous image could simply be interpreted as picture language, an image of what unbridled joy looks like. But when Jesus comes, he actually does these things literally. And when John the Baptist has a wobble in prison, and sends some friends to ask Jesus if he really is the Messiah, here's what Jesus says to him in Luke 7, referencing this passage directly: 'Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.'

For all of us who live with chronic conditions, we know that one day these infirmities will be healed: that in eternity, in the fullness of Jesus' kingdom, these things will be no more. We may not be able to leap this side of the grave, but a time is coming when we will.

And finally **as we wait with hope, peace and joy, so we receive the love of the Saviour: (v8-9)** 'A highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness.... the redeemed will walk there, and those the Lord has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing.' Yes, it doesn't mention the word 'love' directly, but we know what it cost the Messiah to redeem us. The coming King gave himself even to death that we might be able to walk on this road, that we might be able to sing... (PAUSE)

*Nobody likes waiting: but in Advent we wait with purpose, we wait for a reason, we wait because something good is coming. Better than good, in fact – something which brings hope, peace, joy and love.*

And more than ever, this message of the prophet is exactly that: prophetic, a wake-up call to ourselves and our culture. Over the last three generations, we've created an entire way of life based around not waiting for anything, and we're finally waking up to the fact that it doesn't make us happy. It does for a brief moment, but disappears almost as quickly, and locks us into a cycle of continually having to repeat it. Basically, we've built our way of life on a set of assumptions that are turning out to be myths; if anything, achieving the precise opposite of what they were intended to do. Now we talk about hurry sickness, the tyranny of choice, fear of missing out, information overload. Does any of that sound healthy?

**There is a better way, a different way, an old way, dare I say it.** Our ancestors knew what they were doing when they created seasons of waiting – seasons like Lent or Advent. As it turns out, our children know it too, before we drum it out of them with smartphones and Instagram and guaranteed next day delivery.

The revolution starts here – and it starts with us. I don't have the answer – but I know someone who does. And this Someone is the one we're waiting for: Someone who comes to bring hope, spread peace, cultivate joy and share love. This Someone invites us to wait with him and for him.

May God grant us all grace to respond to his gracious invitation today. What are you waiting for?