

Advent 3 – 14th December 2025

Isaiah 35:1-10 – Song of Mary – James 5:7-10 – Matthew 11:2-11

One day two men found themselves marooned on an island. One man paced back and forth, worried and to some degree scared, while the other man just kicked back and enjoyed the sun. After some time, the first man eventually asked the second man, "Why are you so calm and relaxed? Aren't you afraid we could end up dying here?" "Not at all," replied the second man joyfully, "I make \$100,000 a week and then I give a weekly tithe faithfully to my local church. Rest assured, my pastor will find me."

The third virtue for Advent is joy. Unlike the accompanying three candles, we may wonder why this virtue is represented by the colour pink instead of purple or blue. The origin is said to have arisen from the season of Lent (c 325 AD [CE]), which predates Advent by at least 150 years. During Lent six candles are lit for the corresponding six weeks, where purple is liturgically representative of the solemnity with which we anticipate Christ's crucifixion. At some point, it was decided that at least one of the six serve as a reminder of the joy we also anticipate at Christ's victorious resurrection. And so the third Sunday was chosen. That it was designated pink, arose from another subsequent practice where on the same Sunday a civilian was honoured with a pink rose from the Pope. In time pink was adopted as the liturgical colour for the third Sunday of Advent. The third Sunday is also usually associated once again with John the Baptist.

John the Baptist, was of course, crucial for his role in pointing to the imminent arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. Prophesied centuries earlier by Isaiah (Isaiah 40:3-5), to be the messenger who will prepare the way before the coming of the Lord. As much as being predicted by Malachi to be like the prophet Elijah who would also be sent before the great and terrible day of the Lord (Malachi 3:1; 4:5). When considering Jesus, the former more specifically relates to the first Parousia. And latter alluding more to the second. And particularly if we include the great and terrible day component. That is the Apocalypse.

As we know, when it came to preparing for the first Parousia, and the necessity to repent and turn from old ways, John was never one to pull any spiritual punches. Just as he vociferously challenged the corrupt and immoral conduct of the religious and political elite who should have known much better. No surprise that he eventually ends up attracting the unwanted ire of the psychopathic Herodian clan, who for good measure have him incarcerated. In a dungeon within one of Herod's palace fortresses located upon a mountainous place called Machaerus, meaning "black fortress," and approx. 48kms south-east of Jerusalem and atop the eastern side of the Dead Sea. Alone, bewildered, no longer able to freely roam as he once could within his vast wilderness environment. Separated from mission. And probably a tad disconcerted that things weren't going along according to plan. For his disciples, the Jewish nation at large, and no doubt himself.

With the benefit of being born after John, we can appreciate that much of his angst, any disappointment or disillusionment that arose came from a misunderstanding of what the Christ was all about. Especially where overthrowing corruption and injustice was concerned, and as per the Messiah's CV (Deuteronomy 18:15; Isaiah 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5-8; Daniel 9:24-27). Particularly relating to the wreaking a bit of well overdue vengeance and terrible wrath. Not much joy there. At least for the usual despotic suspects. But understandable given the oppressive and malignant regimes of Israel's past religious and political elite. Similarly for many of Matthew's later 1st century Jewish/Christian audiences, who, as earlier with Jesus and John, were still living under Roman oppression. Yes, eyes were indeed being opened. Ears were being unstopped, and the lame (well some of them no doubt) were leaping like deer. Conquest had at last arrived. But it was not the conquest those awaiting the Parousia were expecting. Like John and his disciples. Which is most likely why Matthew's authors included the following two statements Jesus made concerning John.

For Matthew it was important to establish that no one born was greater than John the Baptist (v11). That is no one born before Jesus. And especially no OT prophet, given that John was the very last Old Testament

prophet to prophecy the coming of the Messiah. Which John also actually witnessed. Jesus' following statement seems to then fly in the face of this accolade. But that's because, being an OT prophet, John had little or no appreciation of the Cross event, or that the Messiah would need to suffer. There was no being crucified, resurrected, or ascending, only to then return again at a second Parousia. That revelation really only came after the event. After John. For which reason the least of those in heaven had a greater advantage than John. This also importantly served to encourage the Christian Jews who were still wrestling with the reality that the Messiah would conquer with sacrificial love and mercy. Not retributive military might.

We can find a similar message proclaimed in Isaiah's oracle from chapter 35:1-10. Both Isaiah 34 and 35 contain prophetic words of encouragement and hope for redemption, restoration, and justice. In this instance as much for the Judahite (Jewish) exiles indignantly suffering under Babylon captivity. As for all nations too, who along with Israel will be righteously restored to worship God in Zion. After the Apocalypse of course. Or the great Day of the Lord. With references to weak hands, feeble knees, fearful or perhaps more accurately "racing" hearts, the despair of this remnant people is physically palpable. Isaiah's words therefore serve to comfort and reassure the exiles, as well as all creation. As they prophetically remain for generations of the many, Jew and Gentile alike, who have suffered and continue to suffer at the hands again of oppressive and unjust regimes and nations. That these promises will one day manifest. And yet, for which very reason, they along with so many, are still called, still encouraged, to live patiently in expectant hope. Perhaps even joyfully so. As were those to whom James was also writing.

Like Paul, and just so many of that time (c AD [CE] 45-62) James wrote as if Jesus' return was imminent. He therefore encouraged his audience to be in the meantime patient. Easily said than done as we all know. He also encouraged them not to grumble against one another. That is during times of suffering. Again, this may have been at the hands of vexatious Jews, or Rome. Though James may have been alluding to the opulent comfort of those who were fraudulently withholding wages from labourers and harvesters (James 5:4). This would have had an even deeper significance if Christians were among the rich. Notably as James had already challenged wealthy Christians against partiality based on status and affluence (James 2:1-7). In any event and despite this disparity and injustice, James directs those afflicted to patiently soldier on. And not grumble. Particularly so as to avert being judged themselves, as the Lord's return was just around the corner. Arguably too with joy, as we are instructed to do when facing all trials (James 1:2). As confronting for so many of us today, as it no doubt would have been for James' audiences.

While it's plausible that John the Baptist had his answers, we can only speculate how he would have processed them in light of his dire situation. He most likely died without ever being fully cognizant of who and what the Messiahship of Jesus Christ truly entailed. Or he may after all have in the short time left him come to that realization or revelation. Particularly being infilled with the Holy Spirit. That he was filled with the same expectant joy, as when he first recognized Jesus is similarly speculative. As most of us come to appreciate once the honeymoon with Jesus is over, and the journey of discipline and sanctification kicks in.

Remembering too that for the Christian, joy is not happiness. But that which is more permanent, and which usually emanates from knowing Jesus. Knowing that we have a future in eternity with our Lord and each other. As it is to know we truly have a purpose for being and existing in this world. Including overcoming this very same world. Empowered to conquer ourselves, sin, evil, and finally death. And which can only really be experienced and mastered through the Holy Spirit, who encourages and guides us to joyfully endure until the end. Irrespective circumstances. Strengthened to hang in there. Patiently. Trusting that we have in a Saviour the assurance of that promise that the day will indeed come when everything will be restored. Where justice, righteousness and equality will prevail. And we will all be truly free to live in fearless harmony as one with God and each other. Because we have that joyful reality available to us, living in us, in the here and now, the expectant hope, peace, and joy of the return of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

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