

## **A Reflection from Revd Ali for the Third Sunday in Advent**

The season of Advent is a time of penitential preparation for the coming of the Light. In this third week of Advent, we remember that the darkness is ending soon and the Light is coming. This Sunday is sometimes called Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin to mean rejoice. Knowing that the darkness is ending gives us a sense of joy and anticipation and leads to rejoicing! This sense of joy is something that is echoed in the natural world. I am always glad when the 21<sup>st</sup> December has passed. The shortest day is over and the days are imperceptibly getting longer. As the earth turns again towards the sun there is the promise of longer and brighter days just around the corner.

In today's Gospel reading (John 1: 6 – 8, 19 – 28) we hear about John the Baptist. The one that was calling on the people of God to prepare to come close to the glory of God in the world. John told the people of God that the Messiah, the Light of the World was close at hand. The people of God were very familiar with the concept of the Messiah, the one who would come and bring freedom to the people of God. Freedom, not just from the occupying forces of Rome, but freedom from sin. Freedom to have a new relationship with God through the one that God had sent. The people of God were also used to many people claiming to be that Messiah – individuals who would wander around Judea claiming to be 'the one' that Israel were waiting for. Sometimes these false messiahs would gather bands of followers. So, it was not surprising that when John came, proclaiming that the Messiah was close at hand, the temple officials, priests and Levites came to see what John was saying. The difference between John and those false messiahs was that John wasn't proclaiming himself as Messiah. 'He himself was not the Light; he came only to witness to the Light' (John 1:8). It was one of the duties of the temple authorities to check out any reports of anyone claiming to be the Messiah and then report back to the temple leaders. So, they are dispatched to visit John, but when they arrive at Bethany, on the far side of the river Jordan, (John 1:28) they find that John is not claiming that he is the Messiah. You can almost imagine the checklist that the officials went through when interviewing John.

Are you The Christ? No

OK, then if you are not The Christ who are you?

Are you Elijah? No

Then are you the prophet? No.

The temple officials would have been used to meeting false messiahs - people making outlandish claims about themselves. But here was a man, living an austere and holy life, preaching repentance to the people of God. Encouraging them to change their lives and live more closely to the way that God intended them to live. John's ministry was very public, people were travelling for miles to hear him preach and entreat them to repent. But John is not making any claims for himself. With their questions, the temple officials are trying to find an answer to take back to the temple authorities. To find a 'box' to put John in, so he can be dealt with appropriately. But John doesn't fit their expectations. He tells the officials that he is the voice of one calling in the desert 'make straight the way for the lord'. He is saying nothing about himself, making no claims for

himself, he is only referring to himself in relation to the one who is coming, Jesus the one true Messiah.

John tells them, paraphrasing the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'I am the one preparing the way for the one who is to come. I myself am nothing, I am a signpost to the one whom I am not worthy to untie the sandals of'. John, in his humility, publicly declaring that he isn't even worthy to do the lowliest job of a servant for the one that was to come. This would have been really perplexing for the temple officials - John wasn't what they expected. John was pointing the way to one who *also* wasn't what the people of God expected. John was a devout, passionate but yet humble man, only concerned with preparing the way for the true Messiah.

John's message, as he points the way to the Christ, the Messiah, the Light is a source of joy to anyone who will listen. We are in the privileged position of knowing the story, knowing the Light to which John is pointing. It is hard to remember that the people of God didn't know exactly who the Messiah would be, but the sense of anticipation increases in some of them as John arrived, announcing that the One they were waiting for was close. Certainly, a reason to rejoice – Gaudete! The message that John shared, that Jesus is coming, the Light is shining, and the darkness and the fear that darkness brings is about to be dispelled, brought joy to the people of God as it brings joy to us today. We, who know the story, rejoice that the Light is coming at Christmas. But we also rejoice Jesus will come again in glory. That he will bring about a new heaven and a new earth. The Light will shine and the darkness will never overcome it. John offered the people the hope of the Light. Jesus is that Light so we can all rejoice – Gaudete!

When John was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, it wasn't just the geographical wilderness on the eastern side of the river Jordan. He was speaking into the spiritual wilderness that we sometimes find ourselves in. Part of our Advent preparation is to remind ourselves that the incarnation, Christ with us, Immanuel is God's response to us as humanity, when we were inhabiting the darkness. God heard the cries of humanity and broke into the darkness of human history. Godself, born as a vulnerable baby in a time of occupation and terror. Godself bringing the Light in to the darkness. The Light that is for the oppressed, the broken-hearted, the captives, the prisoners and those who mourn. Godself revealed in Jesus Christ bringing the great Good News of healing, release and comfort to all of humanity, despite the continued presence of oppression, captivity and heartbreak in our world. But the Advent message, the message of joy, Gaudete, is that the darkness *will* pass. Christ is coming again. Not just as a baby born at Christmas time. But coming again in glory to transform this world into a world where there is justice and peace for all. A new heaven and a new earth. So, as we wait, we prepare by repentance and active anticipation, so that when he comes again in glory, we will be ready to welcome the one true Light. Gaudete!