

Third Sunday of Advent, year A

Isaiah 35:1-10, James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11

John is clearly having doubts. He has publicly proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah but now he wonders if he was wrong. Because it seems that what Jesus is doing doesn't seem to fit with John's preconceived idea of how the Messiah would behave.

Some have suggested this is because John thought that the Messiah would overthrow the occupying Roman forces. But personally, I doubt that. John's message was repentance, which has far more to do with the spiritual dimension than the political.

I think that maybe John, the last of the Old Testament prophets, is expecting something more by way of vengeance as in our reading from Isaiah. *Your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution.* After all, as we heard last week, John prophesied that Jesus would have a winnowing fork in his hand. Perhaps John is expecting a fire and brimstone Messiah. Instead, he gets Jesus, a compassionate Messiah.

Yes, there will be retribution; the prophecy still stands. But it will be at the second coming of the Lord, a day of judgment for the unrighteous.

So, Jesus still calls for repentance, just as John did, using the same phrase word for word, *"Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* Repentance is important.

But vengeance? No, Isaiah 35 isn't about vengeance on individuals. It is about joy.

The chapter begins with joy, ends with joy, and has joy in the middle! Yes, God does come with vengeance, but it is the vengeance of compassion. It is vengeance against the results of hurt and brokenness in our fallen world. God's vengeance is designed to save.

Which is how come Jesus replies to John *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.*

This is pure Isaiah 35. When God comes with vengeance *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.*

God's vengeance is intended to break into our lives with healing, wholeness and abundant life. So, I ask, is this what we experience? Or is ours more of a wilderness experience, something of a spiritual desert? Are we thirsty? Is the community we live in thirsty?

Yes, the people of West Linton and around are good people, as Tony Foley said on Remembrance Sunday. And we can all testify to the many initiatives that are happening in our community to give aid and support to others.

But is there an underlying thirst, a hidden hunger for something more, both in the care givers and the recipients? Is there something of a spiritual wilderness, maybe even unrecognised, within our community? Is there a need for water in the desert?

After Isaiah speaks of the mute tongue shouting for joy he goes on: *Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs.*

This is the good news that the Messiah brings. It is good news for us, and it is good news for the community. Are **we** thirsty? Further on in Isaiah 55 we read that the Lord says "*Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;... come to me.*"

And we can confidently come to the Messiah who says (John 7:38-39) "*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.*" By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

Are we thirsty? Are we thirsty for more of Jesus, more of his Spirit? I hope so and, if so, we must come to him and drink. And we should drink until the water is overflowing.

The flow of living water doesn't happen automatically. It requires action on our part.

But what if we were actually to do that? What would the spiritual desert around us look like? Would there be pools of water in the wilderness and streams in the desert? Would there be bubbling springs of the water of life wherever we go? Wouldn't that be great?

The Lord gave Ezekiel a vision (which is recorded in chapter 47) a vision of water flowing out from the temple and providing a river for fish of many kinds and fruitfulness along the banks of the river. Interesting. We are called to be fishers of men!

We are the temple of God. The river should flow out from us. And the fascinating thing about the river in Ezekiel is that the further away from the temple the water goes the deeper it gets. It is as if the water multiplies as it flows.

You know, I have a picture in my mind of water flowing out from St Mungo's down into the village, joining with the water flowing from St Andrew's, on down to Romanno Bridge and Newlands and becoming so deep that it flows over the rise into Dolphinton and down into Carlops – you get the idea. Wouldn't that be something?

Isaiah 35 has a similar picture to Ezekiel 47 where we read: *In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.*

I understand that usually in the bible the jackal symbolises desolation and desperation. How many of those in the community around us feel desolate and desperate, even if it's hidden? How many of us?

The answer is the living water of Holy Spirit. It refreshes and heals. And as it flows somehow it creates a Highway: *And a highway will be there; we read, it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way.*

Where does the highway go? It leads to the dwelling place of God: *They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

This is the joy of Advent- or at least part of it; a highway in the wilderness into the presence of God himself. It should be joy for us and our privilege to bring

joy to others through the living waters flowing out from us to those around us.

AMEN

What I would like us to do now is, if you are willing, for each of us to light a candle at the station and while you do so, if you would like, ask Jesus to give you more of that living water of his Spirit, more of himself, more of his joy. I will play a song while we do that.