

*“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another? Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see.” – Matthew 11:3-4*

“God is going to restore Israel’s Glory Days”; “God is going to kick out those Roman foreigners who make our lives hell.” “The Messiah is going to come and drain the swamp of political corruption in Jerusalem.” “God is going to Make Israel Great Again!”

With some creative license it is not hard to imagine that Jewish expectations about the Messiah at the time of Jesus would have sounded an awful lot like a Donald Trump rally. The Israelites expected God to restore them to the glory of the kingdom period under David; they longed for the days when Israel was at the centre of the world – the consolidated kingdom under David, the wealth and wisdom of Israel under Solomon; they expected that God would help to drive out all the foreigners who oppressed them – that God’s Messiah would tell Pilate and his collaborator Herod what’s what and free Israel from the yoke of slavery; they believed that God would make their nation the crown jewel of the world – that nations would stream to Israel as the centre of knowledge and power, just as the prophets had foretold. They longed for the halcyon days of old. They, just like Donald Trump’s main slogan, wanted ‘to make Israel Great Again.’”

In one sense the promises that we heard Donald Trump make to America and the world this election cycle were promises of restoration, promises of prestige and prosperity, promises of return to glory, one might go as far to say they were promises of salvation. Donald Trump was speaking to a dissatisfied and seemingly downtrodden population in America and offering them a prophetic vision of vindication, victory and vengeance. Although they wouldn’t likely use this language, for many in America, Donald Trump was seen as a saviour, as a Messiah, as someone that God would use to right past wrongs, to defend their worship, to bring back prosperity, to defeat their enemies and to bring America back to global prominence and greatness.

I think that sometimes the Church or churches act like they need this sort of saviour. How often have you heard or maybe even said “well if we couldn’t just get back to the glory days... when Sunday Schools had 500 kids in them, when you had to come early to get a seat?”, “If only the preaching were better we’d surely grow!” “If only we could be more welcoming then people would come” or maybe you’ve heard of some pastor of Christian thinker who is touting some program or book that will help return our churches to the good old days, to the days of prominence, prosperity and pre-eminence. Christianity in the west feels seemingly downtrodden, and dispossessed – pushed further and further to the margins of society. It seems that perhaps even the church is on the look-out for the next Messiah, the next saviour, the one who will truly come with power and great glory. We want God to make the Church Great Again – because in our estimation it just doesn’t seem as great as it used to be.

In each of these cases we misplace our trust and focus of salvation. The word Antichrist is understandably a loaded term – usually we think of the end times and the greatest enemy of God but Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, suggests that we should think of an antichrist as anything

in this world that promises salvation other than salvation rooted in Jesus Christ. Whether it is a political ideology like Marxism which offers a utopian vision for the future; a political leader like Donald Trump who promises to make his country great again, or a church pastor or leader who offers the next great salvation to the church through programs or initiatives – each of these is in their own way an antichrist – not inherently evil or destructive, but rather something which diverts attention away from the grace we receive in Jesus Christ, in his Crucifixion and Resurrection.

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This is the season of Advent: the season of expectation, the season where we prepare to celebrate Jesus’ birth but also longingly wait for Jesus to come again, we wait with expectation for the Messiah who seemingly defies all expectations. For all the talk of Jesus as Messiah, Jesus as Lord and King, it doesn’t always seem that way. It would be much easier if Jesus met our expectations, if Jesus fit the profile as vindicating judge, as restoring conqueror, as cosmic saviour then we could convince ourselves that everything would be easy – there would be no war, no pain and suffering, no disease, no hunger, no blindness, no lameness, no deafness, no death. In the midst of all of this, we might like John and his disciples ask the question “Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?”

John asked Jesus this question because before he was thrown in prison, he had anointed Jesus as the Messiah, he had pointed his disciples towards Jesus; John had believed that he was preparing the way of the Lord, making the people’s hearts and minds ready for the coming Messiah – and yet Jesus did not seem to fit the bill. The reports he heard about Jesus were nothing like the cosmic judge, or vindicating military champion – they were nothing like the fire and brimstone that John had preached in his repentance tour in the Jordan Valley. Instead what John had heard about was another preacher and miracle worker making the rounds of Galilee, a preacher preaching about God’s Kingdom, healing some but not everyone, a holy man pointing people back to God. Jesus seemed to be a shadow of the Messiah that John expected.

And Jesus’ response to John’s questions is this “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.” Tell him what you hear and see. Witness, testimony. Tell him what you see of the Kingdom breaking into this world, tell him the simple yet powerful truth of lives being changed by the Kingdom, of the poor and downtrodden hearing good news of mountains of being brought low and valleys being raised up. Nothing grandiose, no great cosmic upheaval, no great vindication of Israel – but rather communities being transformed, lives be restored to full relationship within communities, sins forgiven, isolation undone. While this might not seem like it fulfils the messianic prophecies of scripture, the deeds that Jesus describes are taken right out of the words of the prophet Isaiah.

The salvation and vindication that Jesus offers is on a cosmic scale, but is not a salvation or reconciliation that is primarily political or military in nature, God’s plan of salvation is

inherently relational – it concerns humanity’s relationship with God and with one another. It is as simple and as glorious as one blind man receiving their sight, simple and cosmic as people who are marginalized being brought into community, as simple and as glorious as one sinner being redeemed and restored to relationship with God.

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Jesus’ answer to our questions and doubts about the coming of his Kingdom are the same as his answer to John. Go and tell what you hear and see. Go and tell what you see of God’s kingdom breaking in your own life, go and tell what you see and hear of the small miracles of God in your life. Each of us have stories to tell of God’s grace and mercy, each of us have stories to tell about the way we have experienced God acting even in the smallest of ways. Earlier this year we heard members of our community share stories of their faith, stories of where God was working in their lives, stories of God’s kingdom breaking through. Some were stories of how God had worked great deeds to bring them into the light of God’s presence, into the path of following Jesus; but most of them were stories of the day to day ‘mundane’ miracles of faith, the daily stories of God working in each their lives. We have these stories – each of us.

We as a parish have these stories. Stories of the way that God has worked to bring us together, even if there is still some ways to go. Stories of the way we have come to know our community better and seen the face of Christ in our neighbours through ministries such as our community soup lunch, prayer walks, knitting group. Stories of God giving us the resources and courage so that the hungry are fed and the naked are clothed right here in our community; stories of the the lonely and isolated welcomed into fellowship. God is at work in this community, God is at work in our parish and in our lives through the small and great works of his grace.

God doesn’t promise to make the Church Great Again, his goal is not to return us to the days of old rather God, offers to each of us in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit moments of grace that are visible signs of the kingdom here and now. Each of us are called to share these moments – share our stories of grace with our community to let people know how our lives, how this community’s life is impacted by all that God has done through Jesus Christ. Let us this Advent and Christmas season ring out with joy about the good news we have experienced – that is how we wait with expectation: go and tell them what you have seen and heard.

Let us Pray.