



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

OXFORD

**15 December 2019: Choral Eucharist**

**The Third Sunday of Advent**

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

**The Revd Clare Hayns, College Chaplain**

I wonder if you've seen *The Play that Goes Wrong* staged by Mischief Theatre Productions? The premise is that the students of Cornley Polytechnic are in the middle of rehearsals for 'Murder at Haversham Manner', a 1920's murder mystery. They are a mixed band of actors, some excellent and some utterly dreadful. They start off reasonably well and then things begin to go wrong. Lines get forgotten and cues missed. The props fail and the set starts to go wrong. It's wonderful slapstick comedy. Actors fall through doors and things begin to fall spectacularly apart. It gets more and more ridiculous until the entire set collapses and at the end of the play the cast is left on stage surrounded by debris and in tatters.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. That season of waiting and preparation for coming of the Christ Child. Also the season of madly shopping and the impending realisation we're not remotely 'ready for Christmas', as shopkeepers cheerily ask.

Canon Mark Oakley has edited a really excellent book with a chapter called 'A Good Advent'. And we begin Advent with good intentions. We will be more reflective. We will spend more time in prayerful contemplation. We won't be consumed by consumerism. We will prepare well for the coming of the Christ Child.

However, what if it's not like that? What if we find our Advent has been far from 'good' and has been in fact rather disappointing and frustrating?

Our planned quiet times with God got interrupted by various crises, frustrations and annoyances; we have found ourselves overwhelmed by the demands of the season; what if, instead of playing out in the way we anticipated, our experience of Advent so far is as if we were on stage but the play isn't working out the way we'd planned, we've forgotten lines we thought we knew really well, the set is crumbling around us and our fellow cast members are falling off the stage.

Our readings for last week and this recall John the Baptist. Last week he was confident and powerful, the strong man of the desert who heralds the way for Jesus. 'Repent', 'make his paths straight', 'one who is more powerful than I is coming'. (Matthew 3: 2, 3, 11)

Now we jump several chapters and see him in a very different light. He is in prison. Put there by King Herod who had taken exception to his fiery preaching, his candour in telling Herod he shouldn't marry his brother's wife, and his claim that God's kingdom, and the true King were on the way. The enthusiasm and certainty have waned. For John, everything seems to have gone spectacularly wrong.

And from prison he's beginning to wonder if all his sacrifice was worth it. Jesus doesn't seem to be following the script he had imagined for the Messiah. He seems to have forgotten what he's meant to be doing. 'Are you the one who was to come...or should we expect someone else?' (Matthew 11.3) He seems to be saying 'Is this it?...well, if this is it then it's not very impressive'.

Remember the Israelites had been waiting 700 years since the prophecies of Isaiah and there had been seeming silence from God for that time. They were expecting a Messiah to save them from their persecutors. They were expecting a prophet like Elijah who would sweep through Israel bringing judgement on those who disobeyed God. Last week's reading had John saying: 'His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing-floor'. (Matthew 3.12)

And things didn't turn out as he expected. Jesus didn't seem to be doing what was expected. He spent his time with the poor and the outsiders; he didn't seem to bother very much about the political situation. Herod, the ruler they despised, was still King of the Jews and was still allowed to do what he wanted.

We can perhaps understand the disappointment of John the Baptist who wanted the world to change right then and there. We can perhaps relate to the times when we have expected God to do something that hasn't happened. When we've prayed and prayed for a situation and it hasn't worked out the way we wanted it to; when our lives, the country, the world seem rather too like *The Play That Goes Wrong*.

So how did Jesus respond to John's questions? He sends a messenger back to John in prison to tell him what they had seen and heard. 'The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor'. (Matthew 11.5) These are all straight from the prophecies

of Isaiah. So Jesus is saying yes, *I am* the one you expected...but I'm not *what* you expected.

They were still thinking in human terms where power is more like King Herod. When Jesus speaks of the 'reed swaying in the wind' he was alluding to Herod's coins which had a swaying reed on them. 'A man dressed in fine robes?' – the robes of the Roman rulers. Jesus was a different type of king and his power a different type of power: a servant king. He is a king who gets on his knees and washes the feet of his disciples, and teaches them to do the same; a king who doesn't sort out the world's problems by force but who chooses the weak power of love and forgiveness.

Today is Gaudete Sunday, Rejoice Sunday. We are called to be part of this new Kingdom and to be people of hope and joy, even if and when things seem to be falling apart. 'The wilderness and the dry land SHALL be glad, the desert SHALL rejoice and blossom' (Isaiah 35.1) James similarly writes of being patient and confident that the farmer's seeds are growing under the ground even if we can't see them. (James 5.7)

In the incarnation, which we will celebrate in two weeks' time, God broke into the darkness and despair of our world and, through the person of Jesus, brought light in the darkness, and healing and restoration: salvation.

One day this will be completed, but until then we are to be patient; to be people who wait for this time with hope. Hope that the best is yet to come; that God's glorious Kingdom *will* triumph.

And whilst we wait for that day we are to be prepared to get to work to rebuild and restore what has been broken; to do the work of Jesus in the world by coming alongside the poor, broken and imprisoned; by working to rebuild rather than tear down; by being people who notice and point out signs of shoots, of hope, to those who need to see and hear them.

And above all on this Gaudete Sunday we can rejoice. Not necessarily because things are going our way, but because we are loved. Even when everything seems like it might be going wrong.

I will end with a quote from the great theologian Henri Nouwen who, speaking of joy, said: 'Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war or even death - can take that love away'