

Sunday 14 December 2025
The Third Sunday of Advent

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 35:1-10

NT: James 5:7-10

Gp: Matthew 11:2-11

John the Baptist is perhaps the archetypal angry young man. The gospels relate that he was just a matter of months older than Jesus, and so when he sends word from jail he's in his early 30s. We know that the world John and Jesus inhabited, the Roman occupied Holy Land of the first century, was full of bubbling tension about identity, spiritual and national. Those questions matter to young people in a particular way, seeking shape for their lives, something to take pride in, and in John's case, a palpable sense of decline, of departed glory. He had grown up on the myths of Israel's golden days, long ago, but now he was aware, as Jesus was, that God seemed to be mocked. So John, with his charisma and a young man's conviction, called the people to look for a new start, a restoration of the good old days, above all, for God to act. And that heady mix of hope and disappointment was bound up in the promise of the coming of God's anointed servant, the Messiah, and he came to believe that this figure was none other than Mary's son, Jesus, his cousin, raised in Joseph's workshop in Nazareth.

But then the Jewish ruler, Herod Antipas, who was the son of bad old King Herod who had met the wise men, and whose violence had forced the Holy Family into exile, to protect the child Jesus; the son, Herod Antipas has had John arrested, and if you know how the story ends, his imprisonment comes to a violent end, when he's executed without trial, for insulting Herod Antipas' wife. The Messiah doesn't spring him from prison in a daring guerrilla operation. He doesn't even visit him there, it would be too dangerous. And it isn't recorded in the gospels what John made of the reports smuggled back to him in prison of Jesus' ministry, healing, preaching, proclaiming God's Kingdom in ways John couldn't fully comprehend. What kind of Messiah was this? What kind of God? Jesus' own disciples only began to understand it after the crucified Christ rose from the dead, after all. The Lord's call to repent, to turn around, and to receive the grace of his mercy, which he guarantees and secures at Calvary, this is all beyond the imagination of John the Baptist, and everyone else. It still blows our minds, or it should. His mercy is rooted in irrepressible divine joy, Easter Day is our foundation, even in midwinter.

Last year this city and region were convulsed when an angry young man in Southport turned his hands to evil violence, in the name of God and glory. And then in response other angry people went rioting against Muslims and immigrants. And this year the English flag, St George's, marked with the red cross of a Christian martyr, has been raised by angry people feeling that the glory has departed from their neighbourhoods and nation. Liverpoolians sometimes like to pretend that this city is different, that we're a breed apart, with our solidarity, and mix of ethnic roots. This week, for the second year running, Liverpool was acknowledged to be the most generous city in the country per capita, for charitable giving. That's worth celebrating. But that solidarity doesn't exist in a

vacuum. Neighbourliness has to be rebuilt every day, and it would be very naïve to pretend that last summer when there were clashes with the Police on the Strand, just below this church, many of those who took to violence after the Southport killings were, as Crimewatch used to say, ‘men with Liverpool accents’.

So, today, as we gather in this church that was destroyed in 1941 by bombs dropped by angry young men, we pray for all those who are fearful and lost and in need of salvation, our whole nation, and people of every nation. We need the joy of the Lord. Here we seek to hold together the loves that Christ commanded – love for neighbour, which includes love for the city, and the nation, as powerful forces for good, but not the ultimate loyalty placed upon us. When we sing Jerusalem, or God Save the King, we’re expressing these two loves. But our ultimate loyalty is to God, who cares so much for confused and divided humanity that he became one of us, and offers himself to us today, in bread and wine, for our transformation, and salvation, calling us into a life that will go beyond this world, into eternity. Let’s clear the decks of anything standing between our hearts and that joyous love. Be reconciled. The joy of the Lord melts anger.

Today’s gospel ends with a clear expression of Jesus’ love for his cousin, John, an admiration for his courage and self-denial, but also the statement of a truth that should give us assurance and security. Notwithstanding his admiration for John, the most important thing is to see what God is doing in Jesus. Let’s not run in horror when we hear people talking about putting Christ back into Christmas, carol singing in a way that sounds threatening. The Holy Spirit is always working to turn our mixed motives to the good. We crave the joy of the Lord, and many miss the community rooted in mercy he invites all people to join. For me, when I was a confused young man, this place, its community and disciplines of prayer and service, inducted me more deeply into Christ. Pray for more such miracles.

Fr Philip Anderson