

Reflection - Sunday 17th December
Mooroolbark Uniting Church
Joy, Magnificat, Isaiah, John the Baptist
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Here we are, full steam ahead in festive season. It is a week before Christmas and still we wait, we wait, we are still in advent, it is not Christmas yet! None of the scripture readings this week directly relate to the Christmas story – although Mary’s Magnificat could squeak in as a festive story, Handel’s Messiah would make you believe it was. And yet we, as the church, are still not quite in Christmas season yet. I resisted including carols this week, although I promise we will have a good carol sing at Christmas.

The scripture stories are willing us to be patient, keeping us in similar territory as we were last week: we are still in the book of Isaiah and the story of John the Baptist.

So what may be a reason to stay with these two stories? A possible answer to that is they are both saying something about the beginning of things. John the Baptist, as we said last week, is the one who came before, reminding us to prepare the way, prepare ourselves for the light that is coming into the world.

Our passage today, from the book of Isaiah, is also a time of new creation. We find ourselves a bit further along in the story than we were last week. The Babylonians have been conquered by the new great super power – the Persian Empire. And the Persians, as was their policy, have granted the Israelites a right of return. So, they can finally return home after nearly two hundred years. I’m not a historian, and there are layers of complexity trying to understand a people in a particular time and culture far removed from our own. But what we *do* know is the writer of Isaiah is proclaiming a vivid, hopeful message to those people who have returned to Palestine. God’s vision of a renewed society. The rebuilding of Jerusalem, not just externally with the reconstruction of the buildings and the temple, but rebuilding society from the inside, to restore the relationship between the people and God. The people will be called oaks of righteousness, a righteousness that is sturdy and steady and sheltering like great oak trees. Theirs shall be a society of justice – freedom to those tortured, oppressed, imprisoned by the previous system of power. There will be balm and healing for the broken hearted and comfort and compassion for those who are grieving. This is a wonderful vision of a new society, a manifesto of righteousness and truth. And it is extraordinary that it came into being at this point in history when most of those returning from exile had the challenge of navigating the society with those who had strayed behind, many generations before. That cannot have been easy. How do we respond to Isaiah’s vision in today? In the here and now, where our society still buckles under economic inequality, power plays and violence? How does this vision connect with the season of Advent, of today’s season of joy?

I imagine there are many threads of connection for all of us here, unique to all of us, of this vision of a renewed world, of this longing for a renewed world.

The connection that sparked my heart and mind while I was preparing for today is between Isaiah’s vision of a renewed world, and Mary’s song, the Magnificat, and where is joy to be found.

Mary the mother of Jesus is something of a prophet. Although that is not often a title we use to describe her, but I believe it could be. Mary, like Isaiah is proclaiming a vision of a

renewed world. She says in her song that God has destabilised society – those on top have been brought down. God has ‘scattered the proud’, God has ‘brought the powerful from their thrones’ God has ‘lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things.’ As we will soon sing in the hymn, the world is about to turn upside down, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. In Mary’s song we hear echoes of the Beatitudes. This is the world lived and shown to us by Jesus, the one who will show us the human face, action and heart of God. For this is crux of Mary’s song, her vision of a renewed world is a spontaneous, joyous response to the baby she carries in her belly. It comes out of the blessing she received from Elizabeth her cousin. Let me take you back to this story of joy! Which happens immediately before Mary’s song.

Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth who is also miraculously with child in her older years, at the sound of Mary’s voice Elizabeth’s child, leaps in her womb with joy. After this joyous experience, Elizabeth bestows on Mary a blessing. “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

What rises in Mary is a song to the new creation, the new world that will come into being – a vision passed down through the centuries through Isaiah. But instead of this renewed society, set in the wake of war and exile as it is in Isaiah, the child Mary carries in her womb *is* the new creation, it is the good news. We are waiting for the birth of new life, one coming into the world that will bring salvation, freedom and infinite love. Mary perceives this in her song, in ways that are probably still unfathomable to her, and Elizabeth with her blessing, perceives this too.

As many of the mothers here would relate to the wonder and the joy of carrying a child, a new life, a miracle of creation in their womb. Christ’s humanity is found in every mother who has ever given birth.

This is where the hope, the peace and the joy of advent are connected. The vision of a renewed world, the fact that we can see it, glimpse it perhaps as we travel together along the way of Jesus, that God believes in us, that this vision is still possible in our world today, this is the gift we can give the rest of the world. Holding onto this hope as a beautiful beacon in the ways that we live, love and serve in the name and in the love of Christ. Amen.