

Advent 3 - Gaudete (Rejoice!)

The Rev'd Joy Hance's leaving service

Who are you?...Make straight the Way



Impenetrable, by Monan Hatoum

Today we stand on the tipping point of Advent, as the heat increases and our attention is focused even more on the great feast of the Incarnation, now just days away. As we do so we come to the 3rd Sunday, when (if there is one) the pink candle is lit, for *Gaudete* Sunday - and the ancient antiphon of 'Rejoice' sounds forth - perhaps we could even say we are to re-Joy ourselves. It's a moment of pause and happiness in what is a penitential season (even if it doesn't always feel like it!). And on this Sunday, the Church invites us to focus on the person of John the Baptist.

We are mindful of John the Baptist in-utero with his mother Elizabeth, the one who leapt in the womb when encountering Jesus in Mary's womb (Lk 1.41). It has been widely commented on that Elizabeth and Mary may be compared with Naomi and Ruth in the OT. Both sets of women cooperate in facing their social and religious locations. And none have an easy ride at all. This story of Ruth is an important one. First, because it reminds us of God's impartiality. The one true God who loves and accepts everyone, regardless of age, sex, race, nationality, (or divorce). The word Ruth means 'female friend' and her story is one of timely coincidences, which reveal powerfully the providence of God.

Both Elizabeth and Mary, like Naomi and Ruth, are part of a spring for creative action for the betterment of the world. As we reflect on this we are, like Mother Julian in her 9th showing, forced to confront whether we feel what protects our inviolate sense of the dignity of every human being is wrath, protest and dissatisfaction, or Jesus' loving closeness to every human being, through which Christ embraces the most horrible moments of human history

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and personal experience. In other words: Jesus is our heaven, that is, the compassionate presence of God in every human being and every human experience. Or as TS Eliot put it, the *'infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing'*.

Yet, mindful as we are of the mothers Elizabeth and Mary and their unborn sons, our Gospel words today are not from Luke's account of John in utero, but are taken from John's adulthood, with the resounding question of today's gospel *'Who are you?'*, as the Jews sent priests and Levites to ask this question. When pushed, John says,

'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness,

"Make straight the Way of the Lord".

For John is a voice making known the Word. And as Esther said last week, for the musicians listening surely you are already humming 'Every valley' and so on!

The question from today's gospel, put to John by the priests and Levite's presupposes an awareness of the scriptural stories of Elijah, but also of second temple Judaism's expectation of an eschatological role for a returning Elijah as the bringer of the Messiah or the messianic age (as seen in Malachi 4.5-6 or Sirach 48.4-12). John rejects this suggestion that he is the messiah, pointing instead to Jesus who must increase as John's importance decreases (3.30).

For John wants us to know that that in Jesus we find 'one flock, one shepherd' (10.16), the one who is the Logos, the Word, present before creation. All creation breathes with the Christ-life. And, of course, we read scripture figuratively (Typology & Tropology) - reading backwards in the light of the Jesus event - for this is an essential part of discerning the anticipatory traces of God the Word and that revelation to the world - not least in what is sometimes called the fifth Gospel, the book of Isaiah.

It is worth saying that in this Advent we immerse ourselves in scripture, not as an exercise in literary fantasy (like trying to live in the imaginary world of Harry Potter or Star Wars). Rather we do so because God is the primary agent at work in and through scripture, and in and through each of our lives.

And just as the question to Peter in Mark 8.29 of Jesus saying *'who do you say I am?'* is a question for each of us. So too is the question to John the Baptist, *'Who are you?'*

These two questions strike me as being seminal to the Christian life. First, who do we say Jesus is, and then who are we in the light of this. And then we have to respond. For each of the gospels ends with an imperative of accepting a commission, as we are sent out to share a story. Having worked out who Jesus is, and who we are in the light of that, each of us is called to respond to the story in which we live.

Joy and Nick you have shared this story with us, and for that we thank God. You have articulated to us a gospel of hope; and Joy you have been a priest as a Ruth, a female friend, alongside us: offering the sacraments and the teaching of the Church, to help us to carry forward the story of Jesus with new found freedom and faithfulness.

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And so today we pause to reflect on the ministry of the Rev'd Joy Hance, and her husband Nick, as they prepare to leave Witney and begin a new stage of life in Stratford. As many of you will know, I've known Joy since I was a young teenager. During her sabbatical time in her last post, she and Nick worshipped with us, and I think it would be fair to say I poached them to come and join us in Witney.

Joy has brought great wisdom, spirituality and pastoral passion. Her ministry with the care and nursing homes and retirement villages, the ministry of healing and wholeness, of prayer shawls and quiet days, and quiet pastoral concern has been vital.

Nick has brought his passion for the Franciscan life, for science and religion, for serving to the fore. And I'm particularly grateful for the journey that Nick went on in discovering a charism to reach out to those in the late night economy through the Night Café and the many discussions about faith and life that arose from that.

But I know that Joy and Nick wouldn't want me to talk too much about them, but about the gospel which is woven through their - and each of our - lives. And just as for John the Baptist, they too would want to emphasise that they must decrease that Jesus may increase.

Today is a border or boundary on their ministry, and on the church's life too as both the Hance's and the Church as a whole prepares for a gear change. From the 17th we move to the days of the great 'O' antiphons as we focus more intently on the coming of Jesus.

This week also marks an important day as we stand on the threshold of the UN migrant day, it is important to remember '.... Barbed wire fences, walls, and migrant camps have been constructed within and at the edges of Europe and North America (Schain 2018; Bieber 2018). These have been designed to contain people. They have also aimed to deter other would-be migrants from making the journey... Simultaneously, though, the promise of what lies beyond the boundary—safety, a move away from poverty, hope—continues to draw people to seek ways around or over them.

As we think of this James is going to share a piece of

*Art work named **Impenetrable**, by Monan Hatoum (screen share)*

*Here we see the work **Impenetrable**. 'The cube formed by suspending barbed wire rods from the ceiling seems simultaneously fragile and intimidating. The thinness of the wires invites entry into the spaces between them while their spiky danger makes this impossible. We look on, stuck, perhaps wanting to explore the cube from within but scared and unable to do so.*

*The artist Mona Hatoum was born in Beirut to Christian Palestinian parents, and she has lived in London since 1975. Her work often emerges from her own experience of exile, and grapples with ambiguity and paradox. **Impenetrable** provokes consideration of structures*

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that seek to confine and deter, enclose and repulse at the same time—edifices such as fences, camps, and detention centres (Hinkson n.d.)

To return to the figure of Ruth: Beginning with the departure from Judah to Moab by Naomi, Elimelech, and their two sons, the book of Ruth is imbued with borders and boundaries. They are woven throughout the narrative and bifurcate the characters. When Ruth accompanies Naomi back from Moab to Judah, she crosses not just a geographical border but a cultural and a religious one. It is a border she must continue to negotiate in chapters 3–4, for she never escapes the label ‘the Moabite’ (4:5, 10). Gender boundaries also come to the fore with the distinct familial, sexual, economic, and legal roles of women and men of the time both highlighted and challenged.

Like the barbed wire of Hatoum’s structure, these boundaries, and our own boundaries, have a power of resistance that is belied by their self-effacing delicacy. They may be unobtrusive but they are dense.

End screen share

So today, as we think of Jesus as our heaven, and as we grapple with the question posed to John the Baptist, ‘Who are you?’ We are faced with the reality of ourselves and the borders of our lives. Maybe this strange Advent we can encounter afresh these familiar texts in new ways. Maybe we, like John the Baptist, can find ways to be a voice crying out in the wilderness, pointing others to Jesus. Or maybe, like TS Eliot, we can only pray that we may, like the dead, be ‘*tongued with fire beyond the language of the living*’. And as we do so, may we know Jesus’ loving closeness to every human being, even in the most horrible moments of human history and personal experience .

May we, then, be given grace this Gaudete Sunday, to rejoice, to re-Joy, even as we grapple with ambiguity and paradox, with change and loss, as we face up to the question ‘*Who are you?*’.

As we do so, my prayer is that each of us will have eyes to see the timely coincidences which reveal powerfully the providence of God in the past, the present and the future. And may Ruth and Boaz, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, and our own Joy and Nick, encourage us in our journeying to ‘make straight the way of the Lord.’ Amen.