Advent 3 - Matthew 11: 2-11

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

As a family – seventeen of us and rising as we add wives and girlfriends with the passing years – we have been in the habit of going to the pantomime in Cambridge every year. We’ve been doing it for over twenty years now. In fact we were celebrating the 21st birthday yesterday evening of my nephew James, who had to be carried out of the theatre on a couple of occasions because the pantomime baddie was too scary for him.

There was a period of five years somewhere in those last twenty years when the script for the pantomime at the Cambridge Arts Theatre was written by Christopher Biggins, who also played the Dame. And there’s always a slapstick scene, isn’t there, with gunge being thrown and the stage gets really slippery. And that was invariably the point when Biggins and his sidekick got so out of breath with all the sliding around that they forgot the script altogether and either had to prompt each other, or occasionally had to be prompted from the wings.

Reading this morning’s gospel, it sometimes feels like the script Jesus is working from bears no relation to the one everyone else is working from…

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is the day we light the pink – or rose – candle in the Advent wreath. Because today is Gaudete Sunday. Joy Sunday. I know it’s also John the Baptist Sunday, but he was a big bloke with broad shoulders and I don’t suppose he’d have been too bothered about whether he got pink or purple, frankly.

But joy is an interesting concept in this Advent period of waiting and preparation.

I said last week that the whole love, joy peace thing was almost too ‘nice’. But maybe it is the antidote to all that is not nice at all. Advent is in some ways a time for just taking stock of human darkness in preparation for the arrival of the Light of the World.

 And humanity is dark indeed. There is a US government document out there somewhere – and I tell this story with the authority of Noam Chomsky. When I was in my teens and studying languages, I had to do a module on Linguistics, which entailed reading quite a lot of Chomsky’s works. However, he is a man of many talents, and is also a philosopher and a political activist.

He discovered some months ago that this document existed – 500 pages of it - produced by the U.S department for transportation - on the subject of vehicle emissions and climate change. Its scientific conclusion was that we can expect temperatures to rise by 7 degrees Fahrenheit overall by the end of this century and that this will make human life pretty well untenable given the knock-on effects on food production and everything else. And what are they proposing to do about it? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Because we’re going over the cliff anyway.

That is the sort of darkness that we want to counter. We don’t want world powers simply sweeping reality under the carpet because the problem is too far gone or too difficult to change; too hard a problem, so we’ll just pretend the problem isn’t there rather than facing it and doing the best we can to alleviate it. Now if some journalist was peddling this story I might be a bit cynical. But if Noam Chomsky has had access to it and says it is, my inclination is to believe it.

So why the pink candle then, and what is there to be joyful about? Well because Advent is about anticipation. Mary was not just any pregnant young woman. She was the Theotokos, the God-bearer. The God of grace is about to burst forth on the world in a way surprising to everyone. And this joy is God’s very nature. This light of Christ is worth not only recognising but sharing.

 Going back then to John the Baptist: remember that anyone could set up as a teacher if they had people willing to follow them and John the Baptist had a significant following of his own. He, however, saw it as his job always to point towards Jesus.

And John’s disciples had come to find out if Jesus was, definitively, The One. The Special One. The one who would be the promised Messiah. So they asked him: are you the One?

And as he often did, Jesus didn’t give them a direct answer. He turned it round to them – go and tell John (who was in prison at this point) what you have heard and seen. The blind seeing; the lame walking; a load of other healing stuff. And the good news being told to the poor. It was all about the action. You can spout words all you like, but if you don’t back them up with action, they are meaningless.

The House of Bishops met this past week and discussed, among other things, the General Election and the state of the world, and considered how we are called to be Church in the context of all that is going on. And ranting about all that is wrong and dark around us does not change anything.

Prophecy – being prophetic – is about transforming the future and making it better and brighter. The sort of prophetic action that Jesus engaged in is fulfilled by us in caring for the poor and those in need; in building bridges where there are difficult relationships at home or at work; in visiting the prisoner, literal and metaphorical.

Whatever actions we perform, they say something about who God is and what God’s world is about. So going back to the Chomsky revelation: we can sit and despair and do nothing. Or we can be part of the prophetic action Jesus told John’s disciples about – and do something. And that, surely, is the world God wants us to be part of – one that cares even when it is hard and we want to go home and hibernate and shut the hard stuff out. We are never doing it in our own strength – we are sharing in what God is already doing.

And doing something that transforms the world around us – in however small a way – is a tiny seed of joy. Happy Gaudete Sunday.

**Amen**