

Joy to the World - Reflection

Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

In the week I went to see a whodunit film that was part of a series I had not previously encountered. It was set around a Catholic church in a small, rural community where the priest, Monsignor Wicks, was something of a cult figure who sees himself as being against the world. Rev Jud, a young priest, is sent to join the congregation, which is slowly dwindling and to bring it back with his message of love and embracing rather than fighting. I'd better stop there for a description before I give away any spoilers.

However, the film got me thinking. It was about love, grace, and redemption. Importantly, it asked the questions about whether people really can be beyond redemption, what has caused behaviours that we see, and how experiencing love can change our experience of the world.

It's a similar dynamic in today's Gospel reading. According to Matthew's story, at least, John is confused. His preaching had been calling out all the bad behaviours he saw around him. In last week's reading we heard him calling the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers." In the same reading, we see John naming Jesus as the Messiah.

Now, a few chapters later, John is in prison and confused. Here is the person he thought was the Messiah, but not living up to what the Messiah was supposed, in his mind, to do. Everyone in John's culture knew the expectations of the Messiah. This was going to be a warrior figure. One who would come and rid the land of the hated invaders; the temple would be cleansed and the people of the land called back to the Torah, living in faithfulness.

Around the time of Jesus and John, there were other "Messiahs" who lived out such a calling. About 100 years after John and Jesus were killed, Simon bar Kochba, or Simon, son of the star, rose as a military leader and Messiah figure. Rabbinic figures saw him as a possible Messiah. However, a Messiah who died at the hands of the oppressors, was automatically seen to not be *the* Messiah. In response to the Roman oppression, there was much looking towards this style of Messiah.

And so, John's confusion is quite understandable. He thought Jesus was doing the wrong things to be seen as a Messiah. There was no condemnation of corrupt leadership nor any

military attempts to rid the land of the Romans or other foreigners. Instead, there is simple preaching about God's love for all and talking about the in-breaking of the reign of God. Where were the words of judgement that were to be expected from the Messiah about those who were different?

Well, as I used to say when I taught biblical studies, it is possible to make the Bible mean whatever you want, as long as you take a small enough portion out of context. This image is case in point, and while we can all have a laugh at it, we are shown that point about texts in context very clearly.



As it turned out, John looked at some passages of the Torah and prophets; Jesus looked at others. John found the passages of judgement – and there are many of these – and turned all the judgement outwards. Jesus read about care and compassion, grace, forgiveness, loving neighbours as ourselves – and he turned the love outwards. Today's Isaiah reading is quoted by Jesus in his response to the question: are you the Messiah or do we wait for another? The blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear. This is transformation at the deepest level and transformation for those who need it the most.

However, there is another layer to the Isaiah reading that is quoted. The desert blooms, water sources in dry land become abundant and an easy highway is built. These words were, of course, first written to the Exiles to encourage them in returning. They are words of hope and looking forward; but there is an additional dimension.



The Arabian desert blocks the most direct route between Babylon and Jerusalem. If one knows the Bedu paths, then it is possible, with camels, to make the distance and survive. The much safer path is to travel northwest along the Euphrates, before turning south down the Jordan valley. Doing this doubled the

distance that had to be travelled. It was hard work. There would have been many people who simply found the trip too hard or too expensive and chose to stay in their exile.

So, the message of Isaiah, the message to which Jesus alludes in this pericope, is that God will help us to return. None are beyond redemption; all can be called back home. The impossible will happen and that will overcome the barriers that are experienced to living in the reign of God. Isn't that in itself a source of joy?

At the start of the film I mentioned earlier, Rev Jud punches his fellow priest. Jud had been a boxer and that fighting instinct takes over; this is why he gets sent to the parish of Monsignor Wicks. Before he is sent away, he goes before a disciplinary board of bishops. He admits to his mistake. "The world needs less of this [boxing/fighting movements] and more of this [opens arms in embrace]."

As we reflect on joy, how can we give our world needs less of this [boxing/fighting movements] and more of this [opens arms in embrace]? How do our actions in offering the embrace bring joy, not only to us, but also to the people around us?