

Sunday 11th December

Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

New beginnings

I wonder what you imagine when you book a holiday.

Maybe you look online, or in a brochure. You see some photos of the accommodation and you read the description. You have in your mind an image of what it will be like. Not just the cottage itself (if that's what you are booking), but the surroundings as well.

But when you get there, its nothing like what you imagined. You check the brochure and you see that it meets everything the brochure says, but in a completely different and much better way. You wonder how you could possibly have thought that the cottage would be any different to how it actually is. What you can see clearly now has enabled you to read the brochure in a new way, the way it was always meant to be read. How could you not have seen that before?

And its that kind of experience that came to my mind as I was thinking about today's gospel reading. Because I have always wondered about this reading.

And the reason I've wondered is to do with the question John asks of Jesus. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

It seems to me to be a strange question for John to be asking for a couple of reasons.

First, I have always assumed that there was a strong possibility John and Jesus knew each other. They were related. Remember Mary's visit to Elizabeth just after the annunciation. It wouldn't take much imagination to think of John and Jesus spending time together as they grew up.

And second, because when Jesus was baptised (and it was John that baptised him of course) there was the voice from heaven saying "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased". Surely John would have heard and remembered those words. Voices from heaven are not an everyday occurrence after all!

So why was John asking the question? How was it that he didn't know that Jesus was the long promised Messiah?

I can only assume it was because what Jesus was doing and saying, and the way he was doing it, was not what John was expecting. We know that the nation as a whole was anticipating a military figure as Messiah. One who would free the nation from the oppressive Roman occupation; a liberator – perhaps even a freedom fighter, a military figure.

I am sure John knew deep down that this military Messiah wasn't quite the kind of person he was preparing the way for, but its quite likely that the one he was anticipating wouldn't be doing and saying what Jesus was doing and saying.

Jesus' response to John was clear. Look at what's going on. Sense the Spirit moving; take in the evidence of changed lives; see the Old Testament prophecies being fulfilled. The fulfilment of those prophecies was clearly not in the way people expected, but it was the way it just had to be. The things that were happening in and through Jesus' ministry could only have come from God.

And the message Jesus was giving to John is one we would all do well to take on board. Watch, listen, feel. Keep your eyes open and look for where you see God at work. And recognise it for what it is.

Of course we probably won't see the sorts of things Jesus was doing, the things John could see. The blind receiving sight, the lame walking and the dead being brought back to life. At least not physically. But in our churches and community I have seen people come to faith; I have seen people given a new confidence and a new purpose. I have seen lives changed. Eyes being opened; new beginnings and new lives.

And if we all keep our eyes open we will each see evidence of God working all around us. It could be those kinds of things – people finding faith when they had none or very little. Or it could be other things that cause us to stop and say wow!.

In the last week or so amongst other things where I have seen evidence of God are the sight of a full moon above the houses on a crisp, bright and cold December morning; The news that family we haven't seen for 2 ½ years – indeed one we have never seen - are coming home for Christmas. The excitement and joy as young children hear of the Christmas story at the Journey to the Stable. Its all about being able to recognise the things of God in a world that often seems so dull.

And sometimes those God moments, those 'wow' moments are things we would never have imagined. God doing new things; different things.

Because God is in the business of new beginnings. Transformations. New opportunities. The past being put behind us and the future being different