

Sermon 15 December 2019**Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11****FSHS****Message: Transformation happens when we actively wait on the Lord.**

The third Sunday of Advent is celebrated in some places as Gaudete Sunday – gaudete meaning 'Rejoice!' We have altered the order a bit and made this the Sunday of Love.

The third Sunday of Advent is meant to be treated as a 'lighter' Sunday, when we take the time to reflect on our own lives, and the good things that have happened because of our faith in Christ. I'm sure you can think of lots of good things that have happened because of your faith in Christ. The reality is that there are also a lot of bad things that happen in our lives which can make our faith stronger or leave us wondering whether our faith has been worthwhile.

Yesterday we heard the sad news of the passing away of Sir Peter Snell at aged 80. (I and thousands of other boys) had the privilege of going to Mt Albert Grammar School, the same school that Peter Snell attended in the 1950s. Although I didn't get there until late 60s FYI, I'm not that old!).

In the foyer of the school admin centre was a photo of Peter Snell in his glory days. A well-muscled young man in full flight wearing the Olympic running colours of New Zealand – the black and the silver fern. Snell won three Olympic Gold medals: one in 800 meters at Rome 1960, and two at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics for the 800 and 1500 metres.

As a boy, every time I went past his photo in the school foyer, I felt as though I was part of something greater. Peter Snell had sat at the same desks. Played on the same playing fields, and several of his old teachers were still at the school at the time when I (and many others) arrived in the late 60s. You I inspired, as though it was possible to be, or to do something great in my lifetime – like Peter Snell. Every MAGS boy must've felt like that.

Like all schools in NZ there were heroes that went to the same school as you, All Blacks, Silver Ferns, famous sports people, opera and pop singers, artists, scholars, businesspeople, a prime minister, and a raft of other 'successful' public figures. **And maybe they made you want to do something worthwhile with your own meagre life.**

As I read our gospel lesson this morning, I could feel myself sitting with John the Baptist - in prison, where John seemed to be asking the question that many of us ask: " **Has my life been worthwhile?**" In your case and mine, "Have I lived up to the expectations of my teachers and parents? Or the expectations of my peers? Have I lived up to my own expectations? The ones I had when I more years in front of me than behind me?"

Last week we read about the rough-living John the Baptist and his expectations of the messiah. In today's readings, we find John in prison, facing his own death. And we find John sending some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he really is the messiah? or whether the messiah is yet to come?

From prison John appears to be asking that question: "Has my life been worthwhile?" "Have I backed the right messiah?" The one I called, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". Is Jesus The One I said would baptise with unquenchable fire? Is Jesus the messiah? Or have I wasted my whole life by putting all my hopes in him? And believing in him? (Have I backed the wrong horse? NZ slang).

In today's gospel reading you might also feel with Jesus as he reflected on his cousin John's situation. John, his dear cousin, in prison unjustly, for speaking the truth to power, and paying for it with his life. Jesus pays his own moving tribute to John, as he tells the listening crowd ¹¹*Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist!*

And John stands as a reminder to us, that in order to reach the transformed life that Christ promised – we must go through the wilderness of repentance. Of turning away from an old life towards a new life in Christ. There is no short-cut or claiming that we are the descendants of Abraham – or the children parents who believed. As someone once said: God has children, but no grandchildren. John reminded people that our faith journey is one that only we can make, with the only life that we have.

The other readings this morning are also about transformation. Isaiah dreams of a world transformed. A transformed world where:

⁵the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶where the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. where waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;
⁷the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water...

In our reading from James, James urges the early Christian community in Jerusalem to be patient, to wait for that transformation like the farmer who waits for the rain to water his precious crop.

⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. **Work on your character. Work for justice. Build up the community. Do not grumble against one another. Take the prophets as an example, who spoke in the Lord's name even though they did not see the promises fulfilled in their own lifetimes.**

But James was by no means a passive person. He was **not** urging the believers to practice the kind of passive patience where God does all the work.

It was the same James who said, 'What use is it to pray for the poor, and to send them away in peace, when you have the ability to feed and clothe them?... faith without works is dead.' (James 2: 14).

Because James urged people to practice faith and works, the reformer Martin Luther called the letter of James, 'an epistle of straw'. Luther wanted James to be cut out of the New Testament because James appeared to be urging people to work out their own salvation by doing charitable works. This did of course agree with Luther's own theological belief that salvation came through faith alone. But thank God, wiser heads in the church prevailed, and the social justice message of James (the half-brother of Jesus) remains in our scriptures.

When James said, 'Wait and be patient' he didn't mean 'do nothing', God will take care of every situation. James was saying **work *with* God**. Practice justice and love. That is actively 'waiting on the Lord'.

Transformation comes as we actively wait on the Lord.

As we wait and anticipate the coming of Christmas once again. What can we expect of the coming messiah?

We can expect Joy in the midst of sorrow. We can expect Love in the midst of hate. We can expect Hope when all hope seems lost. And we can trust that God will be with us.

When we welcome the Christ-child into our hearts each Christmas, we are welcoming everything that the Christ-child represents: We are welcoming Hope, Joy, Peace and Love. These are the gifts that cannot be bought with money. And these are the gifts that we really need.

FSHS Amen.