**Advent 3 Year A – Sunday 11th December 2016**

Isaiah 31. 1 – 10  
James 5. 7 – 10  
Matthew 11. 2 – 11

There are two pictures that have imprinted themselves on my mind: the first, the sight of the Judaean Desert, mile upon mile of rolling sand and second, a picture I discovered of the desert in bloom. It is the case that rare rainfall can indeed turn a desert landscape into a profusion of colour. Those mono-coloured hills can become studded with yellows and pinks and purples. The desert then has hidden within it extraordinary potential and not just the potential for beauty but also the potential for change. Anybody who has travelled in the desert will know that overnight the landscape can change. Wind, a storm in the desert can render it unrecognisable. A new reality can be created. The poetry of Isaiah speaks of the transformation of the desert into a place of beauty, into a place of profusion, a place of fruitfulness. It is into this transformed landscape that glory, that the presence of God will return and will be experienced and bring rejoicing. It is a wonderful picture.

Let’s spend a moment with the people at whom this poetry is directed. Imagine that you have been taken into exile, far away from your home, away from the things you hold dear, away from your own way of worshipping. You are indeed in a foreign land, a land that can indeed seem like a desert. The picture that Isaiah is painting here is a picture of hope for these beleaguered people, a picture that will keep alive their sense of relationship with God, a picture that will allow them to think that there could be a future, there could be restoration. Imagine the effect this would have upon you, upon your sense of desolation and despair. And then he follows this with a description of a redeemed humanity, a world made whole in which there is no weakness and in which all infirmity is removed. If the picture of the desert in bloom fills them with a sense that this metaphor might just mean they could return from exile, this second picture of humanity healed will take them forward to the very end of time when God is in their midst once again, it will take them to restored Eden. Imagine then what effect this dual image will have had on those who had been taken into exile. Could they remain despairing?

In our Gospel reading we find John the Baptist, now in prison, sending his own disciples to question Jesus as to whether he really is the Messiah. This may seem strange given the scene beside the Jordan when Jesus came to John for Baptism when he recognised Jesus as the one to come. It may seem strange given the affirmation in the voice of the Father from heaven and in the resting of the spirit upon Jesus. Strange indeed, but I suspect that even John was imagining a rather different kind of Messiah. The general expectation was that the Messiah would come as king, get rid of the Romans and restore a sort of ideal Davidic Kingdom. There was even some speculation that there might be two messiahs, a kingly messiah and a priestly one. Remember, the children of Israel had been waiting a long time. What, I wonder, had happened to their sense of hope? The Pharisees could perhaps be forgiven for their concentration upon the meticulous details of the law. Was this the way to keep hope alive in the people, to prevent them from becoming downtrodden by the Romans or whoever happened to be in power at the time? The answer that Jesus gives returns us immediately to Isaiah, to that picture of a world restored. For what Jesus points out is that through him, healing has happened, sight has been restored, those who could not walk are now as agile as deer and even the dead have been raised. He is not saying that all has been redeemed, he is not saying that now the new kingdom has come, but what he is saying is that he, Jesus, is the very means of that renewed world. His presence in the world allows for the inauguration of that kingdom and it is up to humanity, it is up to those to whom he has come, to receive it or reject it. But there is no doubt that this is what it is and its precise relationship with that passage from Isaiah leaves not a shadow of doubt for those with ears to hear and eyes to see. His presence is hope.

And then we have those lovely and encouraging verses from the letter of James, again speaking to people who are anxious and who are expecting the imminent return of Jesus. I love the image of the farmer because it is a tender image. The farmer is patient with his precious crop knowing that it needs early and late rain to bring it to fruitfulness. The writer of the letter is urging patience and urging them to behave as though the Lord is about to return. Again he is holding out to them a hope of things to come.

So where does this leave us? Three things: firstly patience. Now by patience I do not mean quite simply sitting by and waiting for things to happen. True patience is more active than this. Patience is about knowing deep down that transformation is possible and because of this it is also about the quality of life that we lead with others. True patience, undergirded by faith, seeks always to enable others to glimpse the possibility of transformation, to have a quality of life that cherishes the other and seeks harmony. It is about a deep seated faith in the compassion and mercy of God for all people. Secondly expectation: I believe we are called to live as though something amazing, as though something extraordinary might just happen. We are called to look at the desert and know that, however unpromising, it can blossom, to know that it can be a source of beauty and a source of fruitfulness. To live in this way seems to me particularly the call of Advent but actually a call for all time. We are to be alive and alert to signs of the kingdom that may take us by surprise. It may be unexpected beauty, it may be that tiny act of kindness, it may be the healing of a friend, it may be the unexpected conversation in the supermarket. I used to quite enjoy going round the supermarket with my clicker and then going to the quick checkout. But it was Edward who reminded me that of course doing it that way means that you do not interact with anyone else, either in the queue or with the person at the checkout. And indeed, it is the case that one often has moving and meaningful conversations in those places. Those unexpected signs of the kingdom and being alert to them is what it means to live in expectation. Thirdly hope: The message of hope is an important one for Advent and for our world. At the beginning of my words this morning I asked you to imagine what it felt like to be in exile. It does not take a great deal of imagination at the moment to think of the exiled people of this world. How do the people of Aleppo feel? How do the refugees feel who have left their homeland? How do the guests at the floating shelter feel? How do those who have to rely on food banks feel? There is a lot that is about exile in the world. And yet there is hope, there must be hope. It is Walter Bruegemann writing about the prophets who says poignantly that absence of hope is a tool of the oppressor. Without hope there is loss of sense of self and with that the capacity to be used and abused. We have seen how the prophecy of Isaiah uses hope both in the picture of the desert in blossom and in the picture of a restored order to bring hope to those who had been taken into exile into Babylon. The message of Advent is that we are awaiting the coming of our Saviour as a babe in a manger. And that is important for what can be more filled with hope than a new human life with all its potential. We are remembering that birth and that hope and we are remembering that we too are called to bring hope to the world through the ways in which we can embrace the values of the coming kingdom, reminding those among whom we live that transformation is possible. We are also called to be those who live patiently and expectantly and hopefully for the coming of Christ in all his glory at the end of time.

So this third week of Advent I call us all to patient living, to expectant living and to hopeful living.