

# The Least in the Kingdom

a sermon preached on the

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent

16 December 2007

at

**St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**

by **Fr David Moore**

parish priest

Lections: Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-19

I confess that after three and half years of theological study I felt as though I had something to say. Close and intensive study of any subject is an exciting enterprise, like a drug for those who hit their straps. Discovery is quite intoxicating, and when old layers of dusty knowledge are swept away to reveal riches beneath, what a thrill. The feeling that I was meant to share this new and exciting information was reinforced by a number of lay people I knew who exhorted me to do so, since, they argued, that in spite of the great biblical and theological breakthroughs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century so many pew-sitters had been kept in a claustrophobic and stultifying dark. Get out there, they charged me, and let the people know what liberating things the scholars and theologians are saying! Yes, I determined, I would do just that. I am now embarrassed to admit to having enthusiastically thrown myself into this foolhardy enterprise, not always uplifting to those on the receiving end, and at times delusory to the preacher.

Not that there there's anything wrong with exciting new discoveries. And God knows that so many have been kept in a medieval dark in matters of church history, biblical interpretation and doctrinal theology. Yes, as our Lord himself makes abundantly clear time and again, there is a responsibility for all disciples to peel back the layers of heavy-burden religion which stifle the life of the soul. Nevertheless, what this spirit of enlightenment so frequently lacks is actual experience, a true authority. The tradition of enlightenment which we have inherited is an excessively rational enterprise, thoroughly cerebral, dependent on externally-acceptable and verifiable facts and theories. The veritable deluge of information available on the internet is testament to the reality that we have confused information with knowledge. This is a particular danger in religion, all the more so than other areas of knowledge because the subject matter involves claims to ultimate truth.

On this third Sunday in Advent we are presented with John the Baptist's question - "Are you the one who is to come?" John is worried about Jesus' credentials. The old authority is proved by correct answers to questions about the law and historical success in relation to religious-political progress in the house of Israel, and that's what the Baptist is looking for. But Jesus' response indicates unexpected credentials, credentials suggesting that the old authority is passing away. What counts now is not that certain correct ideas are regurgitated, that certain laws enforced, nor that the expected signs of success will be measurably demonstrated. Rather, Jesus' response to John signals that there is a new standard of authority - the standard of liberating experience which is born in suffering, out of what seems to be failure and loss. Jesus does not supply correct answers, does not come to offer us correct information. Jesus does not come to change our views with better information, nor tougher rule-keeping. But Jesus does come to improve our eyesight, to transform our vision. The kingdom, which we saw in only narrow terms, we are beginning to see in liberating sight, hearing, mobility, health, good news - vision is a function not of information, but proves itself by the authenticity of an inner truth which always arises in the least, the last and the lost, in the despised places and in failure and loss, ultimately expressed on a cross. "And blessed is anyone who takes no offence."<sup>1</sup>

So the third Advent Sunday symbolises the dynamic of the new creation, the means by which an entirely new position emerges. This new position is not data, better information. The new position is something new and unexpected, because it involves the liberation of those who are usually invisible and irrelevant in society. The blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the dead, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 11:6

poor – these are the hidden realities in the culture, and the inner, feared and despised realities in the depths of our soul. Only when our old securities break down do we learn that we cannot rely on the past, on the tribe, or on external facts and successes. No one can understand the power of the Son of Humanity unless open to the hidden, to the within, to the inner realities of both the culture and the soul. I may be able to tell you some information *about* Jesus, but unless I have experienced the Jesus hidden and despised in my own soul such information can do more harm than good. The church is awash with information about Jesus, but do we actually know Jesus? Intellectual formation which is gained prior to the realisation of inner truth may delay, and possibly even reverse, the process of salvation. Advent’s watching and waiting is fulfilled with the birth of the Human One, the babe, the inconsequential and unimpressive fragile child at the end of the empire in a Judean backwater. The new creation towards which Advent Three gestures is the unexpected and hidden truth which those with access to all the right facts are blind. We go looking, but often for the wrong thing: “What did you go out to see?”<sup>2</sup>

The symbol of Advent Three gestures in another direction altogether: “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Humanity came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”<sup>3</sup> Wisdom does not abide our measures of success. Wisdom is not better or smarter or more authoritative information which can be acquired from external sources of any kind. Wisdom is not a weapon in the battle for supremacy in outer relations, whether economic, religious or cultural. The breakthrough which my friends hoped for will not come through the promotion of enlightened theology, though that has its proper place. In fact, healthy theology does not consist in the imposition of clever ideas falling out of a book or a guru or a ‘heaven’. Theology is always the systematised reflection on prior experience, on actual encounter, and always on encounter which defies or threatens the status quo. Wisdom is the liberating experience which arises organically, within the human soul: “Wait until you feel like a babe in the outer world; then, if the inner babe, the Son of Humanity, appears within you, his identity with the Spirit of Christ will be beyond doubt.”<sup>4</sup>

That’s the task for the soul towards which Advent Three gestures. Expected results are not forthcoming. The breakthrough is happening among the least worthy, and in the least acceptable and hidden domain of the soul. The messenger of wisdom is not dressed as expected, nor meets tribal standards. Even the prophets’ voices, great though they are in the kingdom, are inferior to the inner reality, to the least ones.<sup>5</sup> “Let anyone with ears listen!”<sup>6</sup>

[david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz](mailto:david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz)

---

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 11:7,8,9

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 11:18-19

<sup>4</sup> Kunkel F, *Creation Continues: A Psychological Interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew*, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987, p147.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 11:11

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 11:15