Revelation in Exile
A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: Isaiah 35.1-10; James 5.7-10; Matthew 11.2-11

Revelation in Exile is our theme for Advent, and it has resonated here this week. Every year for the last three years we have held a carol service at St Martin’s for the families of those who are missing, with the charity Missing People and the Missing People’s Bureau of the police. Afterwards we invite them next door and offer hospitality to the families, as they come together to share experiences and support one another. Each year many of the same families return, and there are always new ones. Amongst them this year, a woman whose sister went missing when she was a child came for the first time with her husband, another couple whose son went missing just a few months ago, as well as Denise, a mother who has searched for her son Anthony, for nearly 30 years, and is still seeking peace.

In the service on Monday night representatives of some of the many families came forward and lit candles from the advent candle and shared it around the packed church: a symbol of the hope they have, that their loved ones are still alive, are safe, a sign of their love for them, of the strength they find in sharing their waiting together.

There couldn’t be a more poignant exile than that experienced by those families. For many, part of their life is on hold as they hold out hope for a sighting, to be reunited with their partner, or son, brother, sister, mother, often after many years. They long for that experience of homecoming, of the joy and gladness of being reunited.

And then there is the experience of those on the other side of these stories. The exile experienced by those who go missing. This year the representative from the Missing People’s Bureau read the words of someone who themselves had gone missing, and had eventually been found and came home.

There had been no one thing that had triggered John to leave home, but just a growing sense of exile in his own life, of not fitting in, of being overwhelmed by circumstances, he even described the first day of walking away as one of elation, the relief of letting everything go. And then he just kept going, became homeless, living from day to day, getting by, eventually not daring to make contact with his family because the journey home just seemed so much harder to make than to just keep going. Eventually, some years later, a stranger in the street had recognised him, said they had seen his face on the television, as a missing person, and encouraged him to go to the police.

The experience of exile for those whose loved ones go missing...
The experience of exile for those who have become detached from their own lives...

We find John the Baptist in a place of exile in the Gospel reading today. No longer in the wilderness with crowds going out to see him, sharing his message of repentance and salvation, of the Messiah who will come with power and might and judgement.

From a place of certainty and passion, where he could say with conviction ‘behold the Lamb of God,’ here we find him in a much more uncertain place.

He is in prison, with his life in jeopardy. And now when he really looks at what Jesus is doing, this person that he has staked his life on, he is not sure. Is this the messiah they have longed for? From
prison he hears of the acts of compassion of healing and liberation Jesus is performing for those who are on the margins of society, the least and most insignificant. This isn’t the sort of messiah he was expecting. How is this kind of behaviour going to change the world? Confront the powers and establishment of the day? Is his faith really on solid ground?

In the chapters before, we hear of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, of his miracles, then how he commissions his disciples to take a full part in his ministry and mission. No one expected the Messiah to be a healer. No wonder John questions. Full of doubt, he sends his disciples to ask ‘Are you the one who is to come or are we to expect another?’

Jesus’ reply is not straightforward. He tells John that he’ll find an answer by looking at what he is doing and with what sort of people. He doesn’t proclaim himself but the kingdom of God.

What does he see and hear? One who teaches with authority but who eschews power; who goes to the lowliest, to serve and heal them, not to the places and people of prestige; whose actions bring healing and transformation and life, who follows a way of gentleness.

‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.’

This is the way to faith. It is simple, not complicated and as true for us as it was for John. It is in seeing what Jesus does and in hearing what he says, that who Jesus is will be made clear. And we are invited to follow him and do what he does.

Jesus’ words echo the promise of Isaiah, the poetic vision of God’s kingdom breaking into the world. It is a time of homecoming and transformation and promise, a time when those in exile are brought back from deportation. A time of rejoicing and abundance, and life. In Jesus this homecoming is possible and it is happening.

It is in the places of wilderness and exile that God’s glory is to be made known. That’s the place to expect it and long for it, not somewhere else. Imagine your own places of exile that you know and inhabit. Uncertainty about the future, the exile of joblessness, of strained relationships, of illness, of the expectation placed upon us to achieve, to work harder beyond our strength, of the people we miss in our own lives, simply the exile of our own loneliness in a world that prizes communication not community.

It is in our own experiences of exile, in our own times of waiting and in the midst of doubt that we too ask ‘Who are you?’ ‘Are you the one who is to come?’ ‘Are you really our messiah?’ And in this time of Advent we wait for God to reveal himself to us in new ways of thinking and acting and believing, that will bring us home too. That will strengthen us and make our hearts leap for joy. Perhaps as you have waited patiently you have begun to notice them.

In the memorial service for Nelson Mandela with the South African High Commission, held here on Wednesday this week, there was exuberance, and joy, as the South African community here in London and friends of South Africa celebrated the life of this giant of a man. It felt like a great homecoming. And that journey ends today as Nelson Mandela is laid to rest in the village where he grew up.

In the exile of prison and in those long years of waiting, Nelson Mandela grew in depth and statue and strength. He gave hope to so many people experiencing the exile of apartheid, and we have celebrated this week how much he has revealed to us about forgiveness and courage and what it means to be human. What a messenger of hope to be inspired by this Advent. We give thanks for someone who has given strength to others in situations of exile – of injustice and oppression - around the world.
In the Church Times¹ this week there is a story of how he encouraged the young prison guard on watch to join in when his chaplain came to celebrate communion in his cell on Robben Island. Something that blacks and whites simply didn’t do together. ‘You cannot sit apart’ he had said to him. ‘This is holy communion, and we must share and receive it together’. And the guard had taken off his cap and joined them. This is where we find Jesus’ revelation in exile, in simple actions of hope and inclusive love. This is where love breaks in. This is how the world is changed.

On Monday evening, two women were introduced to each other. One whose son, who had been missing had returned home a few weeks ago. The other whose daughter went missing in July and is living with the gnawing ache of loss and the ‘not knowing’. They shared their stories and experiences and the simple words ‘I know what you are going through’ were not a platitude but life giving words of grace. One woman was a messenger to the other sitting in darkness, as she shared her experience of hope and homecoming. These were words of revelation in exile.

What do you hear and what do you see?

Revelation will come to us in the simplest ways. Open your heart to the evidence you see around you and allow the doubt you have, to be transformed, for joy to come.

We can be messengers of that hope of God’s kingdom in the words that we speak and actions we take. Jesus gives us words and actions that can change the world.

Open your heart to the one we will see revealed in the lowliest of places, in an out of the way stable. And be invited to be part of that revelation for others.

What are the words and actions of hope that tell of his love, that others long to hear and see, that only you can share?

Come Lord Jesus. Reveal your joy and light and love among us.