

Sermon 4th December 2022

Isaiah 11:1-10 and Matthew 3:1-12

Since I began my placement here at Greystanes I have attended Allity, the nursing home up the road at Pemulwuy, once a month to provide a service of worship including the sacrament of communion. The sermon I present to the residents is a boiled down, short reflection on the previous Sunday's theme and the last time I was there I spoke about Jesus stopping to invite himself to the house of the outcast Zacchaeus, who Jesus looked at through the eyes of love. I proclaimed to the residents that Jesus stops to look at all of us in just the same way, through the eyes of immeasurable divine love. At the end of the service at Allity, I spend a bit of time chatting to the residents, hearing their stories, and offering to pray for them. These conversations are a blessing to me, and they make me think deeply about God's love for all people. One conversation has remained with me because I was asked a very important and serious question. A resident came up to me and said "I want to believe that God truly loves me, and that God has a plan to fix this world but where are the signs? I didn't feel it was the right time and place for me to give a complex explanation and I wasn't sure what to say, so I listened, agreed with her, and said, "yes it can be hard to see the signs". Is that true though, is it hard to see the signs, what do you think?

Well to help us think that question through we are truly blessed this morning because both of today's readings and the sacrament of baptism we are about to witness are signs, events and visions that point to the reality of God's presence in this world through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. So we will begin by having another look at Isaiah's prophecy.

In Isaiah's vision of God's presence in the world, we hear the 'one who is to come', described as a king. It is through this king and his qualities, wisdom, knowledge, obedience, and integrity that the peaceful kingdom becomes a reality. It is quite possible that John the Baptist grounded in the tradition of the prophets also imagines the one who is to come as a magnificent kingly figure, an authority on a throne, wielding power, bringing with him fire and a winnowing shovel to sort out the good from the bad. Later in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 11:2-6) there is a telling scene in which John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?". Perhaps for John the change from a broken world full of evil people, to a peaceful world, where all live in harmony was happening way too slowly,

perhaps he too expected to see bigger and better signs, more apocalyptic events, more fire, more earthquakes, more judgement less grace. Jesus answers John's disciples by describing his ministry as one centred on healing and the proclamation of good news to the poor, and concludes in stating "blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me".

Despite John's uncertainty regarding Jesus' identity, the baptism of repentance he called people to in the Jordan was in itself a sign, a sign that God is gracious and always willing to take us back into the divine embrace. Those who came out to be immersed in the waters of the Jordan river were signalling a major change in the direction of their lives, a turning back to God instead of away. In reality, this kind of repentance happens over and over again in the life of a believer, as most of us will at times feel very close to God and at other times drift away. To be baptised into Jesus however is a onetime only event, a sign that in Jesus Christ we are grafted into God's family and become part of Christ's body the church, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the baptism liturgy we will hear in a few moments, we will listen to the following proclamation, 'set free from the power of sin and death, we are thus claimed by God, and we are given the Holy Spirit that we may live as witnesses to Jesus Christ'.

Through baptism and in the living out of its spiritual blessings we become signs of God's presence in the world. So if I could go back in time perhaps I would answer the nursing home resident's question like this, have you ever witnessed a baptism, have you accepted the signs, the symbols of Jesus' love for us in bread and wine at communion, have you ever been part of a loving community of believers, a community that looks out for one another, that does not judge, that accepts you just as you are?

Do you notice the kind smiles and tender care of the staff who look after you? Have you ever watched the delight in a toddler's face when they experience something new, have you heard a baby giggle, have you seen a sunrise or sunset and marvelled at the colours in the sky, have you listened to the birds sing at dawn? Have you looked for signs and not realised that they are all around us?

Where are the signs? How would you answer that question? Have you ever thought of yourself as a sign, as a witnesses to God's love here on earth, as a beacon that offers people a glimpse of the peaceful realm of God. When little Luke is old enough he will be able to say yes or no to the challenge of being a

witness to God's love, because it is indeed a challenge. The benefits of course to saying yes are incredible and amazing, for when are grafted into God's family we too become royalty. How is that possible? Jesus is not the kind of king that lords it over us, demanding obedience, and threatening us with violent punishment, we have a king in Jesus who treats us like sisters and brothers, who lovingly invites us to join him and become just like him, little Christs, beacons of hope, peace, joy, and love in this often dark and scary world. This is a high calling, but don't be discouraged or put off, all we have to do is turn up, turnback, say yes, because our transformation is achieved in and through the love of God, the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**