

Sermon Sunday 15th December 2013

Isaiah 35:1 – 10 and Matthew 11: 2 – 11

I remember when I was studying for my legal qualifications being told that any evidence I intended to use must be tested to ensure that there were no inconsistencies in the evidence that the other side could pick out and cast doubt on my evidence. It became a case of reading, checking, questioning and reading again before proceeding and setting the arguments, the case in motion. Actually this is a good principle for us as Christians; if you insert 'praying for understanding from God' before the words reading, checking, questioning and reading again and putting them in again at the end we will be seeking Gods will. In the reading from Matthew John appears to be doubting who Jesus is and in effect asks for evidence to evaluate.

John was the prophet; the last prophet referred to in the song of Zechariah recorded in Luke's Gospel where Zechariah gave praise for the birth of his son.

In the reading from Matthew's Gospel and the rest of Chapter 11 Jesus is teaching the disciples about the Kingdom of God; this is a theme picked up in Isaiah reading also in which Isaiah gives a clear description of heaven but back to John. He has been imprisoned by Herod because he was seen as a threat by Herod or perhaps even the prophesied Messiah; he had also publicly criticised Herod for marrying his brother's wife. Look at what Herod says when he hears about Jesus in Matthew 14 verse 2 **'This is John the Baptist, he has risen from the dead!'** Confused or scared? But we know that John was sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus by preaching and baptising, look at John 1 verses 6 to 9. He was the last

of the Prophets whose birth and ministry were foretold by Isaiah with the words **'A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight the paths for Him.'** So why did John send his disciples to Jesus to ask 'are you the one to come or should we expect someone else?' John obviously had doubts, no doubt brought about by his imprisonment and suffering but he needed evidence to sustain him. If John's mission was to prepare people for the Messiah and Jesus was the Messiah why was he in prison? Jesus gave him that evidence as to His identity by pointing out His acts of healing, raising the dead and preaching the good news to the poor in spirit. We all find ourselves in this position in our Christian lives, if we are honest. We will come to periods when we doubt and seek evidence of God and His Son Jesus Christ. Yet, unlike John we know that by the Gospels and the other Books in the New Testament that Jesus is the true Messiah who will lead us all to God and His eternal kingdom. If you sometimes have doubts about forgiveness of sin, your own salvation or Gods work in your life look at the evidence in the Bible and the changes in your life when you turned to Christ. Talk and pray with the Prayer Ministry team about those doubts or with myself, Keith or Roy or someone you trust. I know from personal experience when I went through a major period of doubt in my faith the opportunity to talk and pray with people I trusted helped bring me through it and restore my faith. When in doubt do not turn away from Christ, turn to Him God does not abandon us!

Jesus reassures John in verse 10 by saying **'This is the one about whom it is written. I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way**

before you' taken from Malachi 3 verse 1. That was John's role, to prepare people for Christ as the Messiah.

So Jesus is the messiah leading us to God and eternal life in heaven.

Isaiah in verse 8 writes **'And a highway will be there, it will be called the way of holiness.'** The way of holiness is I believe the path we must follow which will lead us to God in this life and the life to come. John prepared the way, as prophesied by Isaiah and Malachi and celebrated by his father, Zechariah, for Jesus and His saving ministry for all who turn to Him. John fulfilled his God given ministry in preparing the way for Jesus yet John is no greater than you or me. Look at verse 11 where Jesus says **'I tell you the truth. Among those born of woman there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.'** What is Jesus talking about having just reassured John? He appears to say that he's no greater than anyone else despite all his work and subsequent suffering in prison and his subsequent death at the hands of Herod to satisfy Salome. What Jesus is saying is that we are all equal in God's eyes. However, we have seen something that John did not and could not have seen, the evidence I referred to before; Jesus' work and His ministry and teachings, His death on the Cross, His resurrection and ascension to Heaven and the gift of the Holy Spirit and the promise that He will come again! At that point we will emulate what Isaiah is writing about in verse 10 **'They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.'**

By following Jesus' way we can achieve joy and banish sorrow now! How? Turn again to Christ in this Advent season and renew your relationship with God in preparation for the celebration and subsequent life and ministry of His Son our Saviour Jesus Christ and the promise of eternal life. That is the message in Isaiah with his description of the wonderful final kingdom of God and the promise of Jesus in Matthews Gospel and all Scripture that we too along with everyone who turns to Christ he and His Father will be saved. If you want the evidence; it is all contained in the Bible – just read!

In Psalm 54 verses 1 and 2 it is written **'Save me O God by your name, vindicate me by your might. Hear my prayer, O God; listen to the words of my mouth.'** John was saved by God when he fulfilled his prophesied ministry. So, please in this Advent season don't just get caught up in the Services and carols and so forth, renew and strengthen your relationship with God and be saved by God through prayer and His almighty love. Ask God to hear your prayer and renew your faith this Advent.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father renew in all of us, in this Season of Advent, your holy spirit and the true message of Christmas. Take us forward into the New Year strong in your love and our own faith. Amen