

# **Sermon online on Sunday 11 December by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader**

*Readings: Isaiah 35.1-10 & Matthew 11.2-11*



## **Expectations**

Walking the dog along the canal path, we were passed at full speed by a lycra glow, no bell sounding and passing within a foot of the dog. Nelson is fine with cyclists but on occasions like this he reacts as a greyhound who sees the decoy hare shoot past on the track. 'Wuffing' loudly, he joined the race. The cyclist slowed: I shouted an apology and that our dog was friendly. Mr Angry exploded, swearing about people who cannot control their dogs. I was left wanting acknowledgement of the difficulties of a shared path or that golden retrievers are not known for savaging human beings. I felt a little angry myself; was my mistake to apologise?

Sometimes our default response can be Mr or Ms Angry, to get in first and take over the situation. Taking control by shouting, and even force, is seen as being strong; apologising or listening is seen as being weak. We want things to suit us now and not later. Best to be the strong man or woman and get

things done. This approach extends to electing leaders. Leaders who look the part - speak loudly and say they can solve problems immediately - tend to win. They tell us what we want to hear – that everything will be alright if we just do what they say. They promise rewards in the short term, look good by putting others down or being harsh with those not in a position to fight back. Leaders like this are elected all over the world.

In Palestine, when Jesus walked the earth, Jewish people were under Roman rule with little to no self-determination. They were crying out for the Messiah whom God had promised to send in the Scriptures. Downtrodden and exploited, they wanted a strong man who with God's help would destroy their enemies. Rather like King David, indeed as an ancestor of King David, he would be a great military leader and become a Holy King of a rejuvenated Jewish nation that other countries would once again respect and fear! Scriptures said the messiah will heal not just the individuals but also restore the nation; justice will 'reign' and Israel prosper.

So, when Jesus heals people, announces the approaching outbreak of justice and peace and then proclaims the Good News to the poor, everyone is interested. Yet, wait a minute, this same Jesus breaks commandments to heal and teach, he is critical of the religious holy men steeped in the scriptures and he tells us to love our enemies. How can this man be the Messiah?

John the Baptist, a relative of Jesus, had been preaching the imminent arrival of the Messiah and, imprisoned, could not

hear Jesus preach for himself, so John sent his followers to check out this Jesus. After all, it was known that itinerant preachers and faith healers went around claiming to be the Messiah. Could this small-town Rabbi faith healer really be the Messiah?

Jesus talks about John the Baptist to the crowd; Who or what did they expect to see in the wilderness? Someone without the resolve to stick to God's message, a rich man in robes or just another prophet with a message? They saw none of those things - they saw John, a man interested in God not riches or power announcing the Messiah.

I wonder what the crowd were thinking with Jesus standing in front of them. Desperate for the Messiah to appear, what were they expecting? Perhaps someone who would compromise and strike deals to command power, a rich wise man with finance and connections, or a military leader and political violence leading to bloodshed and a triumphant Israel? Did they really recognise Jesus?

This Advent, Jesus stands turned towards us. What do WE see and expect?

A strong man who makes everything as we would have it be? A miraculous wave of the Holy hand to bring about justice for all and world peace? Armageddon to create a new world and save the few? Perhaps we feel burdened with personal difficulties or overcome by global problems and don't expect anything to happen. Perhaps we just don't think about the

world ever changing; the Kingdom of God becoming a reality on earth.

In his ministry, Jesus points away from establishing community, justice and peace through wealth and power; in the Gospel story, there is no conspiracy or rebellion. His sacrifice on the cross brings the offer of forgiveness and enables us to live with God in a new way. His triumph over death brings the promise of everlasting life. His rule brings in a new and growing kingdom open to all.

Jesus demands not a military-type allegiance, he offers no earthly rewards. He commands us to live as God intended; by loving God and showing compassion, justice, forgiveness and charity. He calls us to the challenge of seeing God in the stranger and in our enemy.

It is a loving, just and holy challenge and it requires us to be strong. Strong in asking God to remove the Mr Angry that lurks within us all. Strong in seeking to reject the temptation to use money and status to take short cuts to sort out situations that means we benefit, and others lose out. Strong in heeding Jesus' request that we share more, reach out more, build up not pull down, unite rather than divide, find life by enabling others to live.

Rather than ask, 'What do we expect of Jesus?' ask, 'What does Jesus expect of us?'