

Advent 3, Eucharist
11th December 2022
Isaiah 35:1-10 and Matthew 11: 2-11
Mother Alice

Gaudate Sunday – Rejoice! Today is a day of great joy for us as we welcome Penelope and her family back to St Mary Abbots and celebrate her baptism. It is also a day of great joy because today is Gaudate Sunday – the designated Sunday of rejoicing in the Church during this season of Advent. You may have noticed that today we are wearing Rose pink vestments – one of only two outings they have during the church’s year, and they, along with our pink candle, symbolise this great joy. Much of Advent is slow, and quiet, the watching and the waiting, but today we are invited to Rejoice, to rejoice in the faithfulness of God, and in His promises and the fulfilment of them. It’s a joy like no other, a joy that we encounter through the story of the people of Israel, their journey with God, and the story of the coming of the Messiah, but also a joy in our own lives, as we celebrate the way in which God has called and redeemed us, and of course our hopes for the future – for Penelope as she begins her walk with Christ, and for the whole purposes of God to be worked out in the redemption of all creation.

It can feel a little bit disorientating sometimes when we encounter scripture that seems to take us back such a very long way, and then back some more, and then yet seems to catapult us right into the future, and then somehow back to where we are. But the point of this is to remind us of the **STORY**. The fact that God has always been at work through the lives of His people, bringing them to salvation. Isaiah the prophet is speaking primarily to a people who are in exile in Babylon, a people who are broken and wounded physically and mentally, who feel so far from God and their land. And Isaiah simply reminds them of the story of the Exodus, of how God broke the power of Pharaoh and parted the sea to bring his people to safety. Isaiah shows how, just as then, so now once again, God is making a highway, a path, a beautiful journey back home possible. A journey from a place of desert, of emptiness, of barrenness, to a place of flourishing, of life, of possibility. For the people of Israel in exile this reminder of the Exodus brought astonishing hope, the story of their ancestors brokenness and yet the unbelievable power and love of God to bring them to safety. We see this again through the life of John the Baptist who once again is someone who holds these historical truths of God’s faithfulness, and speaks and acts to remind his followers that the God who saved in the past is here to save now. There’s a constant refrain in John’s words – drawing us backwards to the story of the past to make sense of the present, and to give hope for the future.

We live in constant tension between the past, the present, and the future. But today I invite you to rejoice with me. We retell the story of God’s faithfulness, his power and action to save, to lead his people always from being far off to coming home to him. Today is the beginning of Penelope’s walk with Christ, and she joins the story, joins the family, joins the generations of those who God has called home. There’s a beautiful paradox as her baptism today is the symbol of new life but also an ancient rite of salvation: we point both backwards to retell the story that she joins, and forwards as we pray for her life ahead, and then we finish back in the present as she is commissioned here and now to shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father. As we rejoice with Penelope, may we all remember our own stories of calling, of the ways in which God has brought flourishing and fulfilment in our own lives, the way that he has called us home to him. As the hymn Amazing Grace reminds us, Twas Grace that led me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

May we rejoice, and recommit ourselves in faith to living God’s story, trusting in the God who was, as is, and is to come.

Amen