**15TH December 2019**

**Isaiah 35.1-10; Matthew 11.2-11**

Well, the election is over! Thank God most people sigh. It has been a joyless affair! There has as ever, been winners and losers. Yet I know speaking to many people that choosing who to vote for was difficult this time.

The situation was so full of complications and trade-offs, when [politicians regularly mislead](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/dec/09/tories-accused-lying-distract-photo-boy-hospital-floor), or [peddle half-truths](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-50657736)? The questions that were asked were: What should you do if you wanted Brexit, but were concerned about the [Irish Peace Process](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/general-election-2019/general-election-northern-ireland-leaders-in-final-tv-clash-before-polling-day-38773290.html)? If you were in Scotland, what if you don’t want Brexit, but [value the Union](https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/scottish-independence/scottish-independence-labour-open-door-to-snp-deal-for-indyref2-1-5059002)? Should you have voted for the representatives of any party tainted with [anti-Semitism](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2019-50700874), Islamophobia, or [any other prejudice](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2019-50722346), or those lacking in moral integrity and faithfulness? Whose promises dare you trust when it comes to the challenge of meeting [the threat of global warming](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/09/climate-crisis-election-tories-brexit-media) and the need to stop burning fossil fuels, Many feel abandoned and bewildered.[[1]](#endnote-1)

 Advent has been hi-jacked. Instead of calm hope many are experiencing anxiety and dismay as they contemplate the future of the nation, and indeed, the planet.

We look for a prophet, not someone bounced about by circumstance, not a jack the lad who’d be good for a pint down the pub in contrast to someone in a protective ideological bubble (v.8) either. Did any of the would-be leaders on offer deserve the title? And how would we know?

How do you know?

It was a question that John the Baptist asked the disciples of Jesus. How do you know this is the one?

It is difficult to get the fair impression of a person that those disciples who had actually encountered Jesus could report on to John in prison. We have few opportunities to meet candidates face to face, fewer still to see the leaders for ourselves, but are bombarded with soundbites, tweets, snatches of video or headline quotations which [claim to capture something important](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2019-50726592). Dangerously, in this mix doctored clips pass for authentic, and opinion is offered as fact, until trust evaporates. But this passage about John the Baptists questions speak of the thirst for certainty.

Jesus (11.4-6) pointed to his deeds not his words. Is our current problem that there are few actual achievements to judge? Johnson has been Prime Minister for a matter of weeks. [Can we yet judge him by his deal](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2019-50706932)? Do we rather [judge by the pain allegedly caused by ‘austerity’](https://www.yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk/news/boris-johnson-refuses-answer-questions-over-why-he-avoided-looking-photo-leeds-youngster-hospital-floor-1336516)? For that do we blame the present administration, immediate Tory predecessors, Lib Dems in coalition, or a reckless past Labour government? Unlike John, we are unlikely to get a clear answer to the question, ‘Are you the one?’(11.2)

On Friday, some of us were facing bitter disappointment, and perhaps fear. Verses 2 to 3 show John keeping faith with his vision in the midst of his own desperate situation. Will we likewise be able to be secure in our vision of a world in which God has purposes, long since announced by prophets and apostles, which will, we know, in the end prevail?

And, on Friday, equally some of us will believe that we’ve got what we hoped for. Will we have the humility to bring it up against the challenge of v.5

***5****The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-23465b)*] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor*

and judge its worth not by self-interested but by God-centred standards? Once the question of Brexit is answered there will be new questions to face: Will we be prepared to go on pressing our politicians to face up to the challenge of global warming, respect other faiths and cultures, fight poverty and injustice, sorting our social care and seek those values, the truths of Advent, which are beyond GDP and a prospering economy, hope, in faith, for joy and, ultimately, peace?

Can the disappointed forebear from finding fault, and the pleased avoid crowing over them? Many times in the campaign the demand was made that this election should reunite the nation. Can we respond to its outcome in a way which has us united in purpose, travelling God’s Highway (Psalm 35.8), strong and weak united in a just and caring society (Matthew 11.5), with a secure place in the world (Psalm 35.10) and a determination to rise to the challenge of global warming, for universal abundance healing and peace (Psalm 35.1-2) are necessary to God’s idea of happy nations?

Time will tell, as they say. Is this the one? Good question John.

Now the election is over we can concentrate on Christmas?

An article I read by Lucy Beresford, a psychotherapist who specialises in relationships.said:

You can picture the scene now: you're sat around the dinner table with your family, tucking into your Christmas dinner when granddad brings up the election, again.

Before getting stuck into yet another analysis of where it went right or wrong - depending on your view - you should take into account how long you'll be in their company.

"If it's just for the meal then maybe engage with them but start with, 'It's interesting and people don't always agree but I respect your position'.

"If you're going to be with them for a long time, which is often the case at Christmas, I would be more careful with what you say.

"Sometimes you won't be able to change someone's mind and it's better to just celebrate the bonds you have, instead of magnifying the differences."

**'Take care around alcohol'**

There's a good chance you'll be spending time in your local pub with mates over the next few weeks.

Lucy suggests keeping an eye on your booze intake "because it can lower your guard and you might say something you'll regret".

But if your mates are egging you on and a politics chat is inevitable, then she advises either getting it over with at the start of the night or suggesting it might be best for the the topic to be "off limits until you've sobered up tomorrow".

And then there's social media.

"For self-care reasons, I'd suggest people spend less time on social media and even switch it off entirely. Don't antagonise a situation or get yourself any more het up".

"Anytime there is drama, step away from social networks, otherwise you'll work yourself up. Remember it's not real, it's artificial."[[2]](#endnote-2)

All the best for Christmas!

We already know it can be a pressured time when things come to a head. For those who have lost loved ones this is the loneliest time of the year. And in a world that glorifies materialism, those who are struggling financially may find it to be most disappointing. There is a stark contrast between those who have and those who have not.

Relationships can often be under strain. A five year old girl was trying to say the Lord’s prayer but couldn’t say ‘trespasses’ so she prayed ‘and forgive us our Christmases as we forgive those who Christmas against us’.

It is well known that the Samaritans and other helping agencies are busy in the run up and aftermath of Christmas

Some Christian traditions observe this Sunday as ‘Rejoice Sunday’ *which is why we have an upbeat service with lots of rejoicing!* Can you rejoice when life is not good? Can you be joyful even in the midst of long waiting and keen awareness of suffering? Can you rejoice when you’ve lost the election. Can you rejoice when you’re one of life’s losers not winners?

As the child who had never before been to a Christmas service said when asked what it was like, "I want some of that `umphant.'" "What's that?" the child was asked. "You know, it's what those people were singing about--`O Come all ye faithful, joyful and try umphant' I'd like to try some of that `umphant.

So how can you survive the season. How can you rejoice at christmas. How can you keep your umphant!

There was the usual article in the paper the other day about surviving Christmas: written by a good doctor it included the following advice:

**Drink in moderation**

**Don't fan the fires**

The fire brigade is busy at Christmas time – all those candles and wrapping paper. Don't cook when you're drunk – both increase the risk of fires.

**Stop the stress**

Christmas is meant to be the best day of the year. So it's hard not to fall into the trap of setting huge expectations – meaning you'll feel horribly stressed and underwhelmed. Plan ahead – don't leave shopping until the last minute – and get everyone in the family involved in the preparations. Traditionally women bear the brunt of Christmas work but giving everyone a job, from clearing up before the event, to wrapping presents and preparing the vegetables, to laying the table and keeping children entertained, helps share the responsibility.

If you are going to stay with relatives or friends, discuss beforehand who will do and pay for what, as well as how long you'll be there. Every family has their own Christmas traditions (which they'll follow obsessively), so work out the day's timetable before the children rip open their presents.

**Don't overspend**

Studies show that people prefer presents that mean something to them and show the person who bought it knows what they like.

**Don't fight with your spouse**

Be considerate and give yourself some time together that isn't shopping, wrapping or cooking.

**Enjoy eating**

People often worry after the event that they've eaten too many saturated fats and too much sugar. They probably have, but this is Christmas.

**Think of others and you'll feel better yourself**

There's a body of research showing that if we do good things for other people, it makes us feel happier. So invite a friend or relative you think might be lonely for a drink, or, if you want to be deliriously happy afterwards, for Christmas lunch. Do some charity work or help out at a Christmas community meal for older people.

Of course there was no mention about going to church or rejoicing in the Christmas message and the hope we have through the birth of Christ – but this is secular Britain. It is not asking the questions we may ask.

The questions people ask are what am I going to get for Christmas – not what am I going to give for Christmas?

How can I survive Christmas rather than what I am surviving for?

The questions at election time can often be what’s in it for me? Rather than what’s in it for them – whoever they are.

The question of whether people have peace with God is not a question most people think about until they are on their death bed or actually in a coffin, by which time it’s too late.

Yet it is the key question in the Bible: do you have peace with God and does that lead you to live at peace (or live righteously – live in a right way – a way of justice and following God’s commandments) with your neighbour.

The desire to see justice and equality manifested in society is as old as time, and a central theme throughout Scripture. Jesus makes numerous references to the ‘kingdom of heaven’ or ‘kingdom of God’ where God’s sovereignty is manifested, and his ‘will is done on earth as it is heaven’.

Although Jesus’ actions and words had direct consequence on the ‘kingdom’ it was not completely realized during his earthly time. This apparent paradox was one of the reasons why the imprisoned John the Baptist sends word to Jesus, seeking verification of his own preaching.

The assurance is given in Jesus' own words (Matthew 11.2-11). Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, lepers are made clean, the deaf hear the dead are raised to life, the poor are brought good news. It is not known whether John rejoiced or still harboured doubts, but he did get the answer to his important question.

You may not feel like rejoicing at the moment. Pray that God may give you the generosity of spirit, like John the Baptist, holed up in a prison cell awaiting execution – to rejoice in the signs of God’s liberation and work **in others**. Rejoice for others and wait patiently for the day when others will rejoice for you – because that day will come – because God is faithful and God is good.

How do we know that? How do you know that Jesus brings peace? Because of what he has done – because of what he continues to do and because of what he promises to do.

We point to scripture: this is what Jesus has done, what he is like. We point to our lives – give testimony to what Jesus has done in our lives (hope hear some next Sunday evening at our carol service). We look with hope to a future time when Christ will come again to make all things new.

We celebrate Christmas because God so loved the world that he sent his own Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life. God wants us all to be winners. The winners of his love. The winners of everlasting life. The winners of a transformed world of equality, justice and peace.

Vote for that. Choose Christ. Place your trust in the one who was prepared to die for you, the one who was raised to life for you, the one who will come again to make all things new. He has done it, he is doing it, he will do it. It is an oven ready gospel. And when Christmas is done: God will still be with you.

The peace of Christ to you at this Christmas time and always.

1. Brenda Vance <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/104-november-december-2019-ca/advent-3/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-50780331> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)