

THE MUSIC OF MERCY

Isaiah 35:1-10

Matthew 11:2-11

If you have ever learned to read music, you will know that this sign ||: means repeat. When you see it you either go back to the beginning, or else you go back to where there was another of these signs, pointing the other way :|| . The next time you come to the sign, you ignore it and go on to the next part of the music. Sometimes you are asked to repeat more than once, and it is important to keep count of how often you have played a certain bit, or you might go on too soon - or forget to go on at all, and end up just going over the same little piece of music, over and over, like an old scratched record.

If you are playing in an orchestra or some other music group, then it is important that all the players know just where they are with the repeats, so that you all go forward in the music together. If not, if one person goes on alone, there will be a bit of a cacophony until everyone else catches up.

That is what is going on in this story. John the Baptist has played the music which the prophets of Israel have given him. He has announced that God's special person is coming. He has warned that God expects his people to turn away from doing wrong and make a new start; that they are expected to live in such a way that it is obvious to the world that they honour God; they are to bear fruit in their lives. He has told people that when God's special person comes he will sort them out - will toss them in the air and winnow them like a farmer on the threshing floor, so that only those who are any good will remain.

And then Jesus came, and John expected him to notice that there was a repeat in the music, and to go over what John had already laid down, talking about God's judgement and bringing an austere sense of God's presence to the people.

But when Jesus came he went right on to the next phase of the music. The threatening, foreboding mood is over, and John is wrong to expect it to continue for ever. He comes and he gets alongside people, even being baptised to express a repentance he had no need of. He heals the sick, restores people to their right minds, gives sight and hearing, and spends much of his time with the poor and the outcast of society. It is a different theme of the music altogether.

And so John, now languishing in prison, and perhaps hoping that this Messiah cousin of his would bring in political freedom and so unlock the door of his dungeon, John sends to remind him that he has got the music wrong. The one who is to come is surely to change things by bringing God's judgement on the nation.

But Jesus' reply is a gentle reminder that although he is not acting as John expected, yet he has not brought in a theme completely alien to what has gone before. John looks to the fiery part of the prophetic writings and the dramatic acts of judgement which some of them performed. Jesus is looking to the joyful parts of the prophets. He is looking to the parts that tell what life will be like after judgement, after God has restored his people. He is thinking about passages like Isaiah 35, which we read today.

Isaiah talks about God coming, coming not to judge but to save. And because God comes, everything is different. People know the difference in their own personal lives, even in their physical bodies. Those who feel feeble find strength, those who are blind see, those whose steps are faltering gain the strength to leap and run, and those who have forgotten the power of speech not only speak but even sing. God coming to his people is a matter of tremendous joy.

When God comes to his people he also opens the eyes of the mind and the heart, giving understanding and love where once there was none. He opens the ears to the cry of the oppressed, and gives those who are faltering in their faith the strength to go forward with confidence. He even helps those who would normally be shy and retiring to find the courage to tell of what God has done for them.

God's coming even affects the physical world, claims the prophet. When people live and work in harmony with God's plans and designs it is even better for the planet. When God comes to us, things change, within us and around us. They change, not in sorrow and fear, but in joy. They change for the better.

This is the music which Jesus reintroduces. Before it has been merely the whisper of promise, not a full-blown melody in its own right. Isaiah and others had said this would happen, but they had not seen it for themselves. But now Jesus does the things they have promised. He lets the music of mercy have predominance over all the other parts of the symphony. Jesus has ignored the repeat sign. Or maybe we should say that John has miscounted. He thinks there is still at least one more repeat to go, but actually the music is further on than he knows. He expects judgement, but Jesus' acts prove that the mercy which comes after judgement, the healing which comes after the time of sorrow is already breaking in, and it is Jesus' job to bring it.

Sometimes good people don't like the music of mercy, because they think, (wrongly) that people are going to get away with wickedness. John may have been one of these. But Jesus won't be held back by someone else's expectations, not even John's. Now is the time for the music of mercy: it has been hinted at before, but now everything changes.

Our expectations of God change. It is human nature to think as John did and expect God to come in judgement and anger. Along with John's expectations of how the Messiah would act, we have to change our preconceptions about God, and realise that his love and purposes are bigger than we can possibly imagine. He is more personal, more compassionate, more in line with the whole of the prophetic message. He is not just about demanding, but about giving. God is the one who gives us his Son, and his Son is the one who gives of himself, tirelessly, unceasingly, never insisting on his own needs, always alert to the needs of those around him.

"How happy are those who have no doubts about me," says Jesus. He says it still. For we do doubt. It seems incredible that the news can be so good. We expect to hear the message that God is not pleased, that he wants, demands that we change. We expect to be told to get our act together and simply do better. But Jesus comes with mercy. He comes to say that God is alongside us, not judging from on high. He comes to say that God wants to be with those who need him most, not just those who deserve his help. He comes to say that God loves us. And it seems incredible. And often we doubt. Can it be that good? Is it true that when Jesus comes, everything changes?

Too often when Christ comes to us, when we hear the good news of mercy, we hold ourselves back. Jesus comes to us, but we don't want to let him get too close. We hold on to our preconceptions, and are afraid, so we imagine ourselves to be superior, to be, not so much undeserving as not in need of God's saving love. And then, when we find that things go on just as before we say "There, I knew it was too good to be true. Nothing changes."

But to hold on to our preconceptions is to miss the point as surely as John did. That part of the music is over. The prophets were great in their day, and they knew

God as no one else at that time could. John was the greatest of them, but even his day is over. If we keep on expecting God to act in wrath and judgement we simply haven't got it. Jesus has begun something new. Now there is the possibility that we can be more than any prophet. Jesus says that the least of his followers, the least in God's new kingdom is greater than the greatest who went before. And why? Because in the new Kingdom everything changes.

The whole way of looking at the world changes. The prophets heard God speak, which made them holy. John was the greatest of all the prophets. But now change how you think, because the least in God's Kingdom is even greater. When we know Christ, we have a more direct communion with God than has been possible to anyone who does not know Christ. Following Jesus gives us a unique access to God's presence, to the very heart of his love. And so our whole way of looking at who is great has been changed.

Before it was those who denounced others who were called great, those who called for change or else. But now those who are great are those who follow - who follow in the footsteps of him who gave sight, mobility, healing, hearing, life and who brings good news to the poor. Now we are not called on to change or else. Now the changes come naturally, as following God's Son, we line up our priorities with his, and seek to live our lives in his way of service to those who most need help, compassion and mercy.

Christmas is coming, when we celebrate the amazing love of God in sending his Son to live with us and die for us. May we allow the music of heavenly mercy come close to us, so that following the Son God gave us, we may find that we live in his way, bringing change for the better to all who endure less than God's best.