

Advent 3A 2019

Joy is what happens to us when we allow ourselves to recognize how good things really are.

Marianne Williamson

Most of us can only imagine what it is like, languishing in a prison cell. For a start privacy would be compromised, freedom of movement severely restricted, our diet prescribed by others, the company we keep almost entirely limited to those of the same sex, some of whom would likely be extremely intimidating. At the very least boredom is extremely likely. Little wonder there is a high incidence of selfharm and substance abuse and mental illness, among prisoners.

Even John the Baptist succumbed to discouragement during his

imprisonment. Reflecting on his life he began questioning if he'd made the right call identifying Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. His questioning got the better of him and prompted him to despatch some of his followers to quiz Jesus.

How Jesus responded to John's dilemma sounds rather cryptic to our C21st ears; but it will have been effective for several reasons:

First, Jesus requires John disciples to gather the evidence for themselves, like witnesses in a court case.

Reporting what they see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears will carry weight with John because he already trusts them.

A second reason is closely connected to this; in that it is easier to recognise truth in the context of community. The most important truths are too big for individuals to deal with alone. The kind of truth Jesus wanted John's friends to share with him was akin to Mark Twain's approach to joy "to get full value out of joy you need someone to share it with."

Thirdly, the news delivered by his friends would have instantly lifted his spirits, because the beginnings of Jesus' ministry were an exact fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy; which John would have been fully familiar with.

We can be confident then that John would have received the happiness

Jesus promised to those who keep faith with him.

Jesus used similar words when Thomas struggled to come to terms with the resurrection; “You believe, (he said to Thomas), because you can see me, [but] happy are those who have not seen but believe.”

Faith is disclosed, passed on and regenerated, within the context of human relationships and communities. So, when we find ourselves trapped in a prison of doubt and our questions act like walls, bars and locks; our friends are often best placed to reconnect us to the joy of recognising Jesus as God’s greatest answer to every human dilemma.