

Third Sunday of Advent

For sixty years, the United Nations have encouraged a bill of rights for children, covering everything from children having a right to be listened to by adults, to not being child soldiers, to having a safe place to call home. Article 31 of the rights of the child, is the right to play and to rest.

It may come as a shock that play is so low down the list, that children's lives need protecting from so many other things. It might come as a surprise that play is a child's human right, and internationally considered to be crucial to their growth and wellbeing. Play can so easily be dismissed 'he's just playing', the thing that stops a child conforming to our rules; yet play is the sole work of a child.

If you cast your mind back to your own childhood, think of the things you most liked to play with. Footballs, toy cars, dolls, Lego, I'll let you tell me after the service. Perhaps things which looked like what the adults were using (at least in once's imagination), but were still not the real thing, in real life.

A friend of mine with a lively two year old often says that her little boy is much happier playing with the pots and pans from the kitchen cupboards, rather than the wealth of flashy plastic which doting grandparents have given.

And I think she's got a point, because child's play is all about learning about the world, experimenting and mimicking what the adults do, whilst also pushing the boundaries, making it fun, and adapt to a child's view of life.

It has a flip side too, as play allows children to process violence and trauma, and find an outlet for it when they don't yet have the words. Children need to play for fun and serious reasons, and it's more than a human right.

(The toys which have been donated today acknowledge that right, and every child's need to play, to have fun, and to learn about themselves and the world around them. Toys that will bring smiles and joy this Christmas, for those locally who would otherwise struggle.)

This Sunday is sometimes known as Gaudate Sunday, a day to rejoice, as the Latin translates, a day when the sombreness and seriousness of Advent lightens for a time. Vestments and candles lighten from purple to pink, and we are caught up in the excitement of the impending new arrival.

Into this, we hear and remember the story of John the Baptist; and there is a contrast between this call to rejoice; and the lean, dour figure dressed in camel's hair who stands in the wilderness and calls people to repent. As Pat explained last week,

he feels like a very apt figure as we too walk out of a wilderness experience, and seek the joy of Christ in the midst of austerity

John the Baptist is important, because he's the last person who prophesies about who Jesus will be. Even in his mother Elizabeth's womb, John was already jumping for joy because he came so close to his lord and saviour, when the two mothers met and celebrated all God had done for them.

And today, another John tells us about John the Baptist's testimony to all those who flocked to seem him. The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the lord. I've always read that in a serious, penitential tone, but perhaps John was crying out in joy, just as his mother had once acclaimed the Virgin Mary.

I am not the Messiah, John says. I am not not the prophet, I am not Elijah. I am not even worthy to kneel in the dust and take off the sandals from Jesus' tired feet. John is not the person they're looking for, but he is a signpost, a living example of who is really coming.

There is something playful here, for John is living out what it will be like when the reality of God in human flesh comes close. John shows us an example, he models what knowing Jesus will be like. What John is doing is real and important, but the faith John practices will be brought into sharper reality by Jesus' coming, where we come to a clearer picture of just how much God loves us, and how life changing this relationship will be.

But there is a darker side to John the Baptist's work, as he is imprisoned and then beheaded by King Herod, foreshadowing the grief and pain of Jesus' own sacrifice and crucifixion. We know Jesus wept for his cousin John, seeking out solitude to grieve, and came to terms with this violence and trauma. Jesus too learnt from John as he played out the struggle with human authorities before his own time came.

Without John the Baptist, Jesus' own life and ministry would have looked very different, for John trains us to see that the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible are made real in Jesus. One who brings good news to the oppressed, who binds up the broken-hearted, and proclaims liberty to the captives.

Like children playing games of being adults, playing at living the grown up life, John the Baptist brings us closer to Christ. We need to learn to build that highway for ourselves, to take heed of that the light shining in the darkness means for us.

That is a lifelong journey, where we learn a little more until the day comes when we see Christ face to face. Every time we misjudge or mess up, Christ's forgiveness sets us back on the path, his grace lets us learn more about him and about ourselves as beloved children of God. If that's not rooted in play, I don't know what is.

So this gaudate Sunday comes with a call to rejoice, and be a little playful. I didn't say childish, but to be like John the Baptist and play out what it will be like when Christ comes again. To play out the relationships, the rules, the society, which we long for in the kingdom of God. To imagine what things look like to God, and live in His kingdom for a time.

We do that in our community life together, in our worship, in our own prayer and reflection time. It will take practice, we won't get it right first time, for play may well be messy along the way. That's ok.

But the more we do, the more we will recognise Christ's coming, and the more we will jump for joy and rejoice that the Lord is indeed near. Amen.