Here we are, half way through Advent, on the third Sunday traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday (Guadete meaning rejoice! - and I hope you heard the words joy and rejoice running through the reading from Isaiah). Here we are with a new government which has a large majority in the House of Commons. On this day, with those two events in mind, the second half of the collect for this week seems particularly appropriate:

 give us courage to speak the truth,

 to hunger for justice,

 and to suffer for the cause of right,

 with Jesus Christ our Lord.

As we pray for our Prime Minister, for the government, for all elected MPs; so we must pray for the marginalised, the invisible, the powerless, for all who are unable to make their voices heard.

Our country - the nations of England, Scotland, N Ireland and Wales - has been torn apart by the politics of the past three and a half years. Now is the time for healing, for the voice of peace to be heard above the strident cries that have been so loud of late.

We need to pray for healing and for peace. But if all we ever do is pray, then nothing will change. We need also to pray that we will play our part in making change happen. So I read again those words from the Collect:

 give us courage to speak the truth,

 to hunger for justice,

 and to suffer for the cause of right,

 with Jesus Christ our Lord.

Each of us has the power to influence what goes on in the communities where we live, where we work, where we spend our leisure hours, and in this way we can shape our nation. This influence is shown in who we are, it’s shown by what we say and do. Often our words and actions will be quiet and almost unnoticed, but through them we can make a difference for we are joyful and hope-filled Christians, following in the footsteps of our Lord and Saviour.

It was a time of hardship for John the Baptist. Where Isaiah spoke of rejoicing and singing, John had been locked up for speaking the truth about Herod’s marriage, and would eventually be martyred for his criticism. No wonder he seemed to have a crisis of faith - to doubt himself and to doubt Jesus. No wonder he sent his disciples to ask Jesus: ‘Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?’

Jesus does not condemn John’s doubt. He accepts that John is doubting, and is honest enough to express his doubts to Jesus. Jesus answers him: ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see.’ The evidence they take back to John reminds him directly of the words of Isaiah: ‘the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.’

Jesus goes even further than reassuring John, for he speaks to the crowd of who John is, and tells them he is the one about whom it is written:

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way before you.’

And that quote also comes from the book of Isaiah; it’s one that John would have known well.

John lived in an occupied country, where many in government seemed untrustworthy; where power was in the hands of the wealthy; and the nation was divided about how best to respond. He thought he knew that the Kingdom of God had come … but the events of the past few days and weeks had caused him to doubt.

Jesus sent him reassurance, specific reassurance that John would have understood. In it there was healing and release and good news. He just had to open his eyes and ears: to see and hear what was happening.

In these turbulent times that seem to have suddenly arisen just a few years ago - turbulent times throughout the world, not just in our own country - it would be easy to just wring our hands and say, ‘but what can *I* do?’

Perhaps our answer comes partly in Jesus’ response to John - we too need to see and hear what is not reported in the media - what we see and hear in our own community, in this lovely community of North Nibley, that show us the basic goodness of the people among whom we live.

Perhaps too our response comes in the reading from the letter of James - be patient; stand firm; do not grumble. Just as a farmer knows there will be a crop at the right time, so we can be confident that God’s Kingdom will come. Our task, as followers of Jesus, is to proclaim the good news that the Kingdom of. God will come on earth as it is in heaven; and to work together to speak about the good that already exists and is being done in our community.

John came to prepare the way of the Lord - may we do the same.

Amen