**Reflection – 3rd Advent\_11th December 2022**

**In August this year, All Blacks Head Coach Ian Foster was in danger of getting sacked. After losing a three match test series to Ireland at home and being beaten by the Springboks, serious questions were asked about his future. Fortunately, he has since been given the chance to redeem himself. He has been backed by the New Zealand Rugby Football Union to carry on in his role – that is, until the men’s Rugby World Cup next year. Which witnesses to the virtue of patience. Just as in sport, life won’t always work out as well as we would like it to. There is always a tension between our own and others’ expectations on one hand and the reality of our human limitations! Only with patience can we draw the lessons that we need to win in the end. The truest test of character is our response to life’s problems, disappointments, and challenges. Without suffering, we wouldn’t know joy. As it says in a line from Sir Henry Newbolt’s poem “Invictus”: *To set the cause above renown/to love the game beyond the prize/and what you are the race shall be…***

**In our Gospel for this Gaudete (Joyful) Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist also has to learn about patience. Instead of being the great religious and military leader who would boot out the occupying Romans to restore Israel’s fortunes, Jesus wants to play at being a country doctor if you please! Looking out from the bars of his death-row prison cell, it seems his expectations of Jesus have come to nothing. Is Jesus the one or must John look for someone else? Jesus is indeed Israel’s promised messiah, but not in the way John has been led to expect! By opening the eyes of the blind, unsealing the ears of the deaf, cleansing lepers, raising the dead and proclaiming good news to the poor Jesus not only fulfils Isaiah’s vision of a restored Israel but also restores humanity itself. Through John’s disciples, Jesus bestows upon John an ironic blessing reserved for those who won’t lose faith in him. What have they come out into the wilderness to see? They have come not to see a reed swaying in the breeze as the plaything of competing opinions or the trappings of false pomp and circumstance, but something that John will never live to see realised, something so much greater than the sum of John’s limited imaginings, wants and desires. For all his greatness as the forerunner of the Messiah John belongs to the past, for the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he is. Jesus is the way to the future. Those who are not scandalised by what Jesus does to defy all expectations are blessed, in that they show that God’s grace is already at work in their hearts preparing them for life in the Kingdom. In the light of the Gospel, patience is its own reward.**

**So how patient are we? For so many of us in the lead up to Christmas with a probable economic recession in sight, the tension between expectation and reality has never been greater. As in the case of John the Baptist’s initial pain and disappointment over Jesus, loss of perspective can make us impatient to the extent of complaining against others, to the extent of becoming blind and deaf to anyone else’s suffering apart from our own. Anxiety, fears for the future, everyday frustrations and disappointments can test our patience to rob us of our joy altogether, causing us to doubt God’s love and to doubt ourselves as though our personal ills will never be healed. Nevertheless, we still have cause for joy. Like the harvest that James speaks of in our second reading the ultimate outcome of Jesus’ mission will come slowly but surely, in the silence of growth that too often goes unseen. As the Lord of Advent who sets prisoners free to fulfil the Psalmist’s song of joy, Jesus frees us from prisons of our own making. He is the just judge who is already to be seen waiting at the gates of history. All he asks of us is that we embrace the present moment to be surprised by unexpected joy. He is the one, after all. We need not look for another. Unlike the Ian Fosters of this world, the Jesus of Advent is the only head coach we’ll ever need who will reward our patience by guiding us to victory in the test match we call life. To set the cause above renown/to love the game beyond the prize/and what *we* are the race shall be…**

***Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience for the small ones; and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake* (Victor Hugo 1802-1885)**