Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

I was watching an article on YouTube about a used car salesman. As a small boy he’d been fascinated by cars. As a teenager he’d bought some cheap old cars, done them up and sold them for a small profit. Over time he bought better cars and more of them. Eventually he found himself renting a plot of land and setting up his own business.

He still loved working with cars, especially quirky British models most other dealers wouldn’t touch. The cars were great, it was his customers that drove him mad.

Anyone who has worked face to face with the public will have some sympathy with the car dealer, and also John the Baptist when he says to the crowd – You brood of vipers. I can think of a few teachers who might like to use that phrase at a parents’ evening. But we’re not meant to go round upsetting people so sometimes what needs to be said doesn’t get said.

Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

Let’s take another look at that verse. Firstly – rejoice. Today is Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin, rejoice ye. We light the rose coloured candle in our Advent ring because rose is the liturgical colour for joy.

Advent is a tough season. We are watching, waiting, preparing. It is a time for self-examination and in former times for fasting. By the third week of a fast people were weakened. Gaudete is a sign of God’s grace, the fast is relaxed, we draw close to the birth of Christ. This is a day to rejoice at hope that is entering our world.

And then gentleness – let your gentleness be known to everyone. We tend to think of gentleness as tenderness or kindness, as a mother is gentle with her child. But in ancient use gentleness had another meaning, in the Psalms for example it means loving correction. So when a parent disciplines a child, and takes the tough responsibility for guiding a child through the complexities of life, that also is gentleness.

It is the same loving correction we hear in the voice of prophecy, the voice of a loving parent reaching out to rebellious and disobedient children. A voice that is often ignored, and often resented, but a voice that speaks in love and will not give up.

I often find myself saying to parents preparing for baptism, if you’re doing parenting right then at some stage you will be the worst parents in the world. The meanest, the most strict, the ones who set a curfew when everyone else is allowed to stay out all hours. That is the price you pay for gentleness. But in the long run you also reap the rewards.

John the Baptist saw the need for change. As I said last week the unpopular word ‘repentance’ means to go beyond the mind you have, to think better of yourself, to think better of others, to see new possibilities. But change is hard.

The used car dealer said that 60% of his customers were fine. Many of them came back and bought more cars from him. But 40% were bonkers. They lied about faults on cars they were trading in. They’d buy a £500 banger and then expect the same warranty as a brand new car. They’d be late for appointments, promise to view a car which had to then be prepared and got ready and then they’d never turn up.

Ha! I thought, you want to try being a vicar mate.

Some of John’s crowd got the message – then what should we do? I suspect it wasn’t 60%, just a few, but they understood the need for change.

His advice was very practical and down to earth, share a spare coat, share food, don’t cheat, don’t abuse power to extract money out of others, don’t trade in a car with a broken gearbox (no I made that one up, John didn’t say that.)

But think about it – we know things in our world aren’t as they should be. I was reading a new report on Afghanistan, the desperate poverty affecting millions, and with the Taliban in power what can we do?

As a school governor I read the report that says when children have to self-isolate due to Covid that absence counts against the school’s attendance records. So are teachers meant to encourage children with Covid to attend? It doesn’t make sense to me. What can I do?

We know there are families locally fearful of winter heating bills, or struggling to put food on the table. Is that something we can make a difference about?

I read of a teacher in Uganda, a man with 20 years experience, earning £30 a month, who has had to give up teaching to run a farm to feed his family. How will his children get an education?

Same question as the crowd asked – then what should we do?

About Afghanistan, I don’t know. I suspect there isn’t much I can do other than be aware and pray and watch for when things might change. We need to discern what we can change and what we can’t. Don’t let one prevent us from doing the other.

About school attendance – well I have a good track record of asking awkward questions to those who make silly policies.

About local families – well we have our Foodbank and we know that works.

About Ugandan children’s education – well our Christmas card present aid gifts can make a difference. So far we can send some chickens, a nanny goat, a sewing machine, some cocoa saplings, pay for schooling, cover the cost of antibiotics, and provide clean water.

There are some things we can’t change. There are others we can. At a wide range of levels we know things could be, ought to be different. We know change is needed.

These point of unease are important. They are the moments when the prophetic voice within us is awakened. They are Advent moments, times when we experience the otherness of God’s kingdom. A different reality draws closer.

Therefore rejoice, even though we are still in the fast God’s graciousness is glimpsed. John’s message is to value those moments of awakening. They lead to the question – what should we do? And that makes it possible for us to be part of a different future.