

December 15, 2019 Third Sunday of Advent

Are you the One? - Matthew 11: 2-11

So how's your waiting and thinking going as we are now deep into our Advent Season? Is the sense of anticipation of the coming of the King becoming more acute? - I pray so. The highlight of the last few weeks was watching the kids' reactions to Julie popping up in the pulpit as the angel in this year's Christmas experience - with accompanying light show - and indeed the impact (again) of the nativity story on both old and young alike: thank you everyone who worked so hard with so much going on .

Well following on from thinking about the prophets and the rather strange packaging for preparing for God's Son coming into the world, I'm sure we don't quite know what to make of John the Baptist do we? - Yet this 3rd Sunday in Advent is when we think

more specifically about him: about his life and his message - and the rather sorry end he's facing in this morning's gospel reading - holed up in prison, facing certain violent death. It's interesting that it wasn't always this way - and even though he tended towards a certain rudeness when people flocked to hear him preach in the wilderness - they seemed to lap it up, most of them, anyway! But the novelty seems to have worn off. Perhaps they're tired of John's rants about judgement and impending doom - and here he is, a sorry sight, locked up...and feeling very unsure.

Jesus' cousin; the one identified by the Old Testament prophets as the Messenger heralding the coming of God's Messiah; an Elijah figure, the One Jesus approached to baptize him at the beginning of his ministry?

But then John isn't as simple to categorize as one of the 12 disciples, like Peter, or James and the other John. He didn't really follow Jesus as such, or come to listen to his teachings - and here he is clearly having doubts...

Now it may not feel like it, but this account of his expectations and struggles is such a *great* subject for Advent. What *is it*, exactly, that John was expecting?.. and why *did* he send word by his own followers to ask Jesus the question that resounds throughout history and into our time: '*Are you (really) the One?*' It's actually a question people are still asking - and for anyone who's seen the Matrix movies, it seems to be the whole basis of the series. *Is Neo (the Christ-like character that comes back from the dead) "the one," who according to prophecy, will save the world (in this case) from cyber-slavery? Isn't it interesting that so*

many Hollywood movies seem preoccupied with themes of salvation and rescue if you look carefully - and you'll probably catch 'It's a Wonderful Life' again.

Back to John...Why is he in such a predicament? Well King Herod in particular had taken exception to his fiery, challenging preaching - and particularly his denunciation of Herod for marrying his brother's ex-wife....all part of John's announcement that the God's kingdom - and God's true king - were on the way. Herod of course wasn't the *real* king, he was a usurper, a puppet, people didn't trust him; God would replace *him*, - and John had the temerity to say so in public - so it's little wonder Herod slaps him in prison.

But now he's there...chained up, John seems disappointed. He'd heard about what Jesus was doing - and it didn't sound at all like the big show of power he was perhaps expecting. What Jesus was saying and

doing couldn't be more different from what he thought his own message was pointing to. John shouted for repentance in the face of the wrath of God. He spoke of an axe cutting down dead trees, and empty husks being burned with unquenchable fire. So maybe he was expecting Jesus to be a man of fire - like the prophet Elijah dealing summarily with the prophets of Baal (do you remember? the pagan God many Israelites worshipped instead of Yahweh?) No doubt John was looking forward eagerly to the day when Jesus would confront Herod himself, topple him from his throne, and become king in his place.

But it seemed as though Jesus was working to a different script altogether - and what the gospel writer Matthew describes as Jesus' Messianic teaching and deeds were not things John even recognized as such. Jesus speaks of *mercy (grace), healing and*

rejoicing - partying, even? Jesus goes around befriending tax-collectors and prostitutes - the kinds of riff-raff that strict Jews would have regarded as outsiders because they didn't keep the rules properly. John would have heard about how Jesus was gaining a reputation, but because he insisted on eating and drinking with these people - it was a reputation as a glutton and a drunkard (a wine-bibber and a sinner). No wonder John has difficulty making the connection!

So what was going on? *Had John been mistaken? Was Jesus the One he'd been pointing to - or should he be looking elsewhere?* I wonder what do you think? Does this Christianity thing hit the spot for you? Or does it seem sometimes seem that this wild and untamed God who's doing surprisingly new things in Christ - and is all about new ways of imagining how life could be - pushes us beyond our comfort zones, beyond the safe notions

of church as we've known it. Jane Williams says this:
"*...the tribute that Jesus pays to John is warm, perceptive and puzzling. He firmly identifies John with the fulfilment of prophecy, and says he is the greatest man ever born. And yet (John) is still outside. He is the messenger, not the message. He has to stand behind and point forward*" - mind you we can be ever grateful he was prepared to do just that - because as a consequence we're now on the *inside*. I love that bit in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* where the talking beavers are trying to explain to the children about Aslan - the Christ figure - in the books - and tells them that he's a lion: it seems so appropriate if you remember...

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he-- quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver...? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Are you the One Jesus? - or should I look for another?

There's a problem here: Jesus has rewritten the old script - especially the key bit of the story about how God was going to let us know what he was really like - much to the consternation of the other actors - let alone the puzzled audience!

Jesus wasn't thinking of himself in terms of an Elijah calling down fire from heaven. And neither is the Christian gospel this fearful thing that some have made it about a God who's just so longing to punish us. This is *good news* of a God who, while he might not be at all safe, (contained, boxed up, anodyne) is **good**. Jesus was thinking of passages like our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 35. John Watson puts the picture these prophecies paint like this:

All creation will be restored to well-being, to shalom and where there is shalom there is well being; where is a lack of shalom, there is poverty in every sense of the word: the desert, the dry land. You think you may have seen fruitfulness before, but you wait!! It is coming in abundance. The very land will sing with fruitfulness that will herald a new creation, a new beginning... There is a new story to be written. There is a new narrative to live by. It will not be one of exile but of coming home. No longer will they need to look back at a better time to escape from their present suffering, but (you) can look forward to a richer time, to help (you) live in the now.

Languishing there in prison John would surely have understood Jesus' coded message - that the 'wilderness', John's home, is to break into flower, and those that are afraid will receive comfort. And it's Jesus, the King, who's ushering this completely new state of affairs in - because that's his job as the Messiah, the Christ - God's anointed one - the Liberator!

And it's mercy that's at the heart of Jesus' mission - not vengeance, not revenge - just as it must remain at the heart of the church's work today. "Mercy" "hesed "

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- that complex of ideas that includes steadfast love, and compassion -
- that which compels God to enter into a covenant agreement with his people that he'll never, ever break, even when he knows we inevitably will - and do;
- that unmerited, unearned favour that God reveals in Jesus and makes so wonderfully available to you and me - grace

Now then here's the rub. Advent is about waiting - it's about changing our thinking - and whether or not it's the script other people want us to follow, this way of grace is the way we've got to go - and Jesus invokes

*a special blessing on people who begin to realize that **this** is the true story which can turn into an amazing coded promise to those who are puzzled - including poor John himself.*

Have a closer look... discern the signs of the kingdom, because **this** is where God is at work:

- not in factions and disagreements (people insistent on doing things the way they think they've always been done - but in rescuing lost and guilty people from the trap - the prison they're in;
- not in the self-sufficient ones who want a bit of God on their own terms (a tame God who doesn't challenge them), but in "ripe, holy lives that are maturing and adorning the Kingdom of the

Father" - as Jesus says a little further in that's
Matthew 13:42/3 from *The Message*)

So... let's be patient (I say that every year don't I - because I need to hear it!). Let's not run too fast this Advent to reach that great highway of the ransomed of the Lord (even if it means you have to look quizzically at people when they ask you "are you ready for Christmas?"). As Tom Wright says, 'there is a dark mystery here, to do with the 'now-and-the-not-yet' of the gospel'. Like kids getting excited knowing and longing for the day to actually come - anticipating it because they know for sure it will - yet still having to wait... So those who recognize the true message of the gospel, and are not offended because they might have been expecting something else...they will know God's blessing - as sure as eggs

is eggs - as they say - because *that's* a promise!

Amen