

Advent 3 (A)

Matthew 11:2-11

The Disappointed Prophet

John the Baptist, the fiery prophet who proclaimed Jesus' coming – the fearless herald who drew crowds and rebuked religious leaders – who stood on the banks of the River Jordan calling people to repentance. Now he's in prison, paying the price for publicly rebuking Herod Antipas for marrying his brother's ex-wife – a relationship that was banned under Jewish law.

Here is John – confined to a small, dark, dank cell, wondering if his ministry has been for nothing – if his life has been spent in vain. It's a bleak place. Given that setting, it seems a rather odd choice of Gospel reading when we're three weeks into Advent. The Christmas bells should be ringing, at least in the distance. Surely, it's time for Mary and Joseph to make an appearance? And the timing of this reading is all wrong. Instead of preparing us for Jesus' birth, we've jumped ahead ten chapters and thirty years. It's all out of kilter – or is it?

The man we read about today is very different from the one we met last week. Back then John was full of confidence – certain of what was happening. Now, in prison, he hears about what Jesus has been up to, but it seems that John is having second thoughts. He questions the reports about Jesus. I wonder if John is seeking validation for his work. It's a natural need, especially when life is tough or when things don't work out how we expected. Has it all been worth it? Was I on the right track? So, John sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

This great prophet of God is facing his doubts and disappointments and seeking meaning for his life. Those in the caring professions tell of how, for many people, the nearer we get to Christmas, the level of tension rises. People experience increased fears, doubts, and questions. There's a marked increase in requests for counselling and admissions to mental health services. So, the Gospel reading isn't as inappropriate as it might seem. John isn't alone in his troubles. There are many in our community who are questioning the purpose of their lives and facing their disappointments and griefs.

John's loss of confidence isn't that surprising. After all, what he'd heard about Jesus didn't fit with his script for the Messiah, and the report that comes back to him confirms it: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." This isn't how John predicted the Messiah would perform. John had described a Messiah who would bring judgement – the axe lying at the root, ready to chop down the unworthy trees and the chaff would burn with unquenchable fire. But Jesus doesn't seem to be pointing the finger of judgment.

John is languishing in prison because he had dared to stand up and challenge King Herod's behaviour. If Jesus were looking for some chaff worthy of burning, he could start by lighting a match to Herod – toppling him and becoming king himself and setting John free. But no! Jesus is going around befriending sinners, spending time with social outcasts, healing and forgiving people. Jesus was gaining a reputation, but not a reputation for doing what John expected.

Let's be fair to John. He's not alone in his disappointment and questioning. Throughout Jesus' ministry, many others will share it. He won't fulfil their expectations. He will radically reinterpret what the kingdom of God means. The same happens today. Each of us has expectations about the kind of Jesus we want and how Jesus should behave. Some want a fire-breather who points out

where everyone else is going wrong. Others want a Jesus who will champion their favourite cause. Or maybe, an inoffensive Jesus who won't demand anything of us, but will pat us on the back and tell us that we're okay.

Eventually our ideas of Jesus come up against reports of what he's doing, either in Scripture or the world about us. Jesus will, at times, upset our expectations. He will ask, "Do you want to follow the living Messiah, or do you want to worship your idea of who he should be? Do you want the hope and challenge of a life with the living Messiah, or merely the comfort of worshipping an image of your own making?"

I suspect we're all given to putting God into a box of our creation. But then, God jumps out of it and challenges our preconceptions. It's disconcerting, but when we face it, we may find something new and life-giving. John sets us a good example. He has his questions, doubts, disappointments – but he doesn't hang onto them. He goes to the source and presents them to Jesus. We're can do the same – go to Jesus with our questions, concerns, wonderings.

Jesus wasn't what John was expecting. He brought fire, but it was the fire of the Holy Spirit. He sought out sinners but, instead of condemning them, he forgave them. He let them have it, but what he let them have was mercy and grace. This is where Jesus' comment, "blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me", comes in. Blessed are you when you're prepared to have your imagination stretched – when you allow God to work outside the square you've created. Blessed are those who aren't offended because they were expecting something else, but recognise the hand of God, the work of the Spirit, the mercy of Jesus, even though it comes in a way, in a place, at a time they never expected or hoped for.

We each come to Christmas with our own stories and experiences of anticipation and delight, of sorrow and struggle, of doubt and disappointment, of dreams and hopes. When Mary and Joseph finally appear on the scene with their son, can we somehow give all these stories and experiences to him, because, as the carol puts it, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in him tonight." We might be like John, held in our prison, confined by the tough stuff that happens in life, but then we discover something. God is bigger than we imagined. We may not get the answers we expected or the response we anticipated, but we can be sure of this: God will come to us and meet us in our weaknesses, in our failures and sins, in our hurts and griefs – and somehow, transform us and gift us with new life. Then, like John, we hear the report: "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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me."

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