

ARE YOU THE ONE?

Isaiah 35. 1-10

James 5. 7-10

Matthew 11. 2-11

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I wonder if you have ever heard the story of the woman who was searching for the perfect birthday card for her husband. After looking at a number of cards which she thought were inappropriate, she came across a promising one. On the outside it read: 'Sweetheart, you're the answer to my prayers.' Then she turned to the inside, where the following birthday greeting was printed: 'You're not what I prayed for exactly, but apparently *you're* the answer I was given.'

In a strange way, I imagine that a similar thought was running through the mind of John the Baptist as he sat there in prison. He and his people had hoped and prayed for years for a Messiah; one anointed by God to lead the nation; a deliverer who would vanquish the occupying forces, conquer all enemies, establish a great kingdom and usher in an era of peace and prosperity. Not that long ago, John had come to believe that those prayers had been answered. The Messiah was none other than his own cousin, Jesus of Nazareth.

As you know, until his recent arrest John had his own ministry. Even though he operated out in the wilderness near the Jordan, great crowds came to hear him. He spoke powerfully to rapt audiences of the need for repentance from sin and pointed them to right living. He wasn't one to mince his words. He was abrasive, insulting, and could be almost mean at times. Still, all sorts of people came to hear him. His celebrity was such that even the Pharisees and Sadducees made their way out to the desert to see him. He insulted them along with everyone else, because he wanted to

prepare the whole nation for the coming of Messiah. His harsh words to them were featured in our Gospel reading last Sunday: ‘You brood of vipers!...Bear fruit worthy of repentance.’

Then there was that magnificent day when our Lord came to the Jordan. John knew that *this was the one*; and he accepted to baptise him. After that, the two went their separate ways. John continued with his aggressive public proclamations, and Christ carried on with his somewhat different approach. No doubt John noticed. John was out there in the wilderness, with locusts for lunch while Jesus was changing water into wine. John screamed at sinners; yet our Lord ate dinner with them. John preached fire and brimstone; while Christ preached ‘love one another’. Hmm.

Now John is in prison: a hell-hole of a place, filthy, nasty, foul and dark. He had preached just one sermon too many, and this one mixed religion with politics, which is always dangerous. It seems that King Herod Antipas had taken up with his half-niece, Herodias, which was problem enough according to Jewish Law;¹ but she was already married to Herod’s own brother, which made it all the worse. John was an ‘old school’ kind of preacher and thundered that such ought not to be. As you may know, powerful people have never liked to be challenged by powerful preaching. So John finds himself in jail.

He has time to think. He remembers the high hopes he had about Jesus being the Messiah. John had been prepared for the revolution, and would have been the first to volunteer to join our Lord’s forces. But time went on, and on...and on. There was no call to arms. In fact, the reports that had been coming in gave no clue that Christ was thinking about overthrowing Caesar, Herod or anyone else. There were, mind you, some intriguing stories of miraculous occurrences in places where Jesus

¹ Cf. Lev 18. 6-16; 20. 21.

was; but no revolution. The Messiah? The answer to our nation's prayers? Well Lord, if you are the Messiah, understand that you are *not* what we prayed for.

It is in this context that John's followers come to Christ and relay John's question: 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus does not answer the question directly but says, '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.' His words are taken right from today's text in Isaiah,² telling an oppressed people that God has come to them and that they are not alone.

And our Lord concludes by saying 'blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.' Yes, even though he does not say it directly, Christ *is the one*; and as he demonstrates to the world that he is indeed the Messiah, he will fulfil the Scriptures but will play by his own rules. He will not be tied to some pre-conceived notion of what a Messiah must do and be.

As John's disciples depart, Jesus turns to the crowd and tells them that John is more than a prophet. Our Lord places John in the forefront of the most revered voices of God; and a few verses later, Christ proclaims that John is in fact the new Elijah who is to come (11. 14), the one who had been spoken of by the prophet Malachi.³ Indeed, John fulfils the role forecast by Malachi for Elijah to return from heaven to signal that the time of transition from the old to the new has come. Not only is John a prophet, he is the final prophet before the end; and the fact that John has come now heralds a new beginning.

That new beginning is nothing less than the arrival of the kingdom of God, inaugurated by Jesus. And in that kingdom, our Lord says, there will be people who

² Cf. also Isa 29. 18-19; 42. 7, 18; 61. 1.

³ Cf. Mal 3. 1; 4. 5.

are greater than dear John the Baptist. In verse 11 we read, ‘yet the *least* in the kingdom of heaven is greater than (John).’

‘How can this be?’ we might ask ourselves. While John stood *before* the coming of the kingdom, the disciples of Jesus (even the least of them) stand *within it*. John did not live to see the ministry of our Lord unfold; he was executed by Herod during the time of Christ’s ministry.⁴ But we – even we, as ordinary Christians, who are ‘the least in the kingdom’ in comparison to the great saints of Scripture and history – have seen the ministry of Jesus on earth come to its completion, followed by his death, resurrection and ascension and the birth of the Church.

We are blessed and fortunate to be living on this side of our Lord’s resurrection and to be a part of his Body. We are not people who are adrift in the world with uncertainty about who we are, or how we should live, or where we are going. We belong to Christ’s community of believers; we are dedicated to him; we are instructed by him; and we carry out his ministry in the world. We all have our own part to play.

When Jesus sent John’s disciples away with the reminder of the miracles that they had seen and heard of, it was as if he were saying, ‘Tell John that this is not the work of one lonely Messiah. It is the work of God, now to be carried out by all who believe; and there is no end in sight. Yes, tell John that I am the one; but tell him also that he should look for another, and another and another. Tell him to search every face for the face of God and not to get tripped up on me, because what is happening here is bigger than any of us. What is coming to pass is as big as the kingdom of God.’

⁴ Cf Mt 14. 1-12.

Yes, our Lord is indeed the Messiah. He *is the one*. But he is also the one who calls us to join him in his on-going and mighty work. What are you and I doing for him at the moment? And what are the people around us seeing and hearing?

Amen.