

Third Sunday of Advent 2013

Or should we expect another?

Who is Jesus? Who is John? These are the two questions that the gospel reading raises for us to think about on this 3rd Sunday in Advent. And both of these questions will then push us to ask a further question about ourselves: Is Jesus really the kind of Messiah, the kind of savior, that we are really looking for? But before we get to us, we need to try to understand what's going on in this exchange between Jesus and first the disciples of John, and then between Jesus and the crowd.

The disciples of John come to Jesus with a question from John: "Are you the one who is coming, or should we look for another?" John is in prison and from his place of incarceration, he has been hearing things about Jesus; he hears about what He has been teaching, the works that He has been doing, and somehow John is now not so sure that Jesus is the "mighty one", the one whom John said would baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit.

But now John has his doubts. He is not sure about Jesus. As Matthew told it, the things that Jesus has been *doing* are are works of compassion- curing lepers and sick people, casting out demons and making people whole. And the things that Jesus has been *saying* undoubtedly seemed to John to be far too gentle and passive- "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth, Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable

to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council; and who says “you fool” shall be liable to the hell of fire. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. If you forgive others their trespasses you heavenly Father will also forgive you.”

Remember, John was the one who called the Pharisees and scribes coming to the Jordan for baptism, “you brood of vipers”! He didn’t mince his words and he didn’t play sweet. John had been anticipating that the “coming One”, the “mighty one”, whom he was preparing for, would bring a fiery judgment on the nation. John had gone to prison because of his own indiscreet and “in-your-face” words attacking the political powers. His agenda seems in some ways to have been pretty different from that of Jesus. It is perfectly understandable, then, that he now had doubts about whether Jesus was the “real deal”. And so he sends his disciples to ask Jesus: are you the One that we have been expecting or is there someone else? Tell us the truth.

And isn’t this the very question that rises in our own hearts and minds at different times, especially when our own backs are against the wall, when things are not going as we had anticipated, when what we are about seems to be contradicted by what Jesus said and did? The recent shootings at Arapahoe High School this past Friday once again have raised this very question for many of us. God, why can’t you just make everything right? Or at the very least, get the bad guys and wallop them before they can harm others!

Jesus' response to this really direct question from John is shaped by the prophet Isaiah's vision of what God's liberating work and kingdom will look like. We heard a little of this in today's first reading:

"Here is your God,
he comes with vindication;
with divine recompense
he comes to save you.

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,
the ears of the deaf be cleared;
then will the lame leap like a stag,
then the tongue of the mute will sing."

What's Jesus saying to John's disciples, and then to us? When God comes to liberate, He is not going to look like just another big imperial power but this time from heaven. He is not coming as yet another king and oppressor like the ones we know in this world. This is not the way it is going to work. Go back and tell John what you see and hear:

"the blind regain their sight,
the lame walk,
lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear,
the dead are raised,
and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them."

When this happens- and it has happened through Me, Jesus told John's disciples- then know that the Kingdom is at hand. The judgment that you want has come in a way that you can't see very easily or very clearly. I have embraced the marginalized, I have challenged the elite's power and self-interest. I have called for new ways of living together. I have brought healing and hope to those had none. But I know that this is not what you were expecting. I know that you were looking for another kind of fight, another kind of Messiah, another kind of "coming". But "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." The early Christian communities who first heard these words of Jesus in Matthew's gospel knew exactly what these words meant: Jesus had indeed failed to conform to so many expectations of what the Messiah would look like and what the Messiah would do. They knew the scandal, the offense, of a Messiah who ends up on a Roman cross", and if we are honest, so do we!

Despite John's doubts about Jesus, Jesus turns to the crowds and shoots six rapid-fire questions at them as a way of affirming John's status and role in God's work:

- What did you go out in the desert to look at?
- Did you want to see a reed swayed by the wind?
- What did you go out to see?
- Did you expect to see someone dressed in fine clothing?
- Why did you go out?
- Did you want to see a prophet?

Ah, that's it, isn't it? John is a prophet, but far more than a prophet. He's the one who has come to prepare the people to get ready for God's empire, God's kingdom, to be

revealed, and revealed it will be- in Me, Jesus says. Maybe not in the way that John expected, but it will be revealed. John, even if he didn't understand it, had prepared the way for God's saving work to come even in a world still ruled by Rome, even in a world still under the hand of oppression and tyranny, even in a world where bad stuff still happens, and happens to good people and innocent people.

Jesus' answer to John's disciples and His questions to the crowd about John raise for us a question that we at some point need to face in our own lives, maybe it is the question that we need to ask during Advent: *Is Jesus really what we are looking for?* The world is still full of injustice and suffering and death. Innocent people are still harmed, shotguns are still being fired and Molotov cocktails still being thrown in quiet, middle-class high schools. We know that this is the way life is. So, are we ready to affirm that Jesus is "the One", the One who has come from God, the One who has brought us what we need most? Are we really ready to affirm a Messiah, a savior, who ends up on a cross? Or, are we also looking for someone else, or something else?

And if we are ready to affirm that Jesus is "the One", what will this then mean for us now? How will it intrude into our lives? How will it change how we live and how we think and how we deal with life? What will it call us to? What does being a disciple of a crucified and risen Jewish Rabbi whom we call the Son and Word of God mean in a world where empire and evil and violence still shape our lives? What will we see when in less than two weeks when we look once again into the manger at Christmas? And what will that sight do to us?