

## **Are you the One?**

OT Reading: Isaiah 35:1-10

Gospel: Matthew 11:2-11

### Advent 3

When John first appeared in the wilderness everything set him apart as a holy man. He lived on locusts and anything else he could scrape together, wore clothes even a jumble sale would have rejected and quickly earned a reputation as a fiery, no nonsense preacher. As the people of Judea flocked to hear him, John gave it to them with both barrels: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near". In other words, "God is on the move. Clean up your act or expect to be thrown into unquenchable fire"! No one had heard anything like this for 500 long years, during which time God's chosen people had simmered under the control of one super power after another. This was what many of them had longed for: the sound of God's message and a sign of his justice.

John's call was an invigorating one, and drew him a lot of converts. Then Jesus came along and John recognised him at once as God's chosen one. Now, he felt sure, it wouldn't be long before this one would bring God's judgement and put the world to rights.

But it didn't turn out that way; and as time went on, John wasn't the only one who found Jesus' ministry puzzling: While John lived on a starvation diet in the wilderness, Jesus changed water into wine at a wedding feast. While John avoided sinners like the plague, Jesus partied with drunkards and worse. And while John shouted hell fire and brimstone at anyone who would listen, Jesus told people to simply love one another and God would do the rest.

The crunch finally came when John, who couldn't see evil without rebuking it let King Herod have it for seducing and then marrying his own sister in law. Herod sent his soldiers with an arrest warrant and John, who had lived with his face to the wind and the sky as his roof found himself confined to four narrow underground walls. Israel's eagle had been caged. And so, from prison, through his disciples, John sent Jesus the question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another"?

This is a truly poignant moment. The tide had turned against John, and against God's justice, the cause to which he had totally committed himself. Somehow he had managed to keep up with Jesus' activities, probably through messages from his own disciples. The first signs were encouraging. Jesus had

begun his preaching with John's own words: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near". Then there were healings, exorcisms, signs and wonders. All this was good. Soon Jesus would declare God's reign and his own authority, and then things really would take off.

But the big announcement never came. Instead of demonstrating God's vengeance and terrible recompense, all Jesus did was preach love and forgiveness, and play doctor to some very marginal people: lepers, demoniacs, a haemorrhaging woman, even a Roman soldier's slave. It's hard to fathom the hurt and disappointment in John's question: Was I wrong about you? If you're the one, please just say so. Or should we carry on seeking?

But Jesus would not just say so. Instead he pointed John's disciples towards some of the people around him. "Go and tell John what you've seen", he said "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 he who takes no offence at me".

It's Isaiah he was quoting of course, but not the part John had focussed on, about God coming with vengeance and terrible recompense. We aren't told what John thought when the disciples returned with Jesus' message, But I know how I might have reacted: Okay - Good for the blind, the lame, the lepers and the temporarily dead. However, you may have noticed Jesus, that I am still in prison".

This is John's calvary, his moment of wondering if he has been forsaken. It's a moment that many of us have experienced in times of crisis. If you have ever been robbed, or attacked, or have lost a loved one too early, or a job or reputation unfairly, you may well have questioned God's purpose, or the efficacy of Christ's salvation. Which one of us has never, in anger, hurt, disappointment or loss asked John's question: Jesus, are you the one, or are we to wait for another?

What John had wanted and expected was a Messiah who would roar in like a hurricane, sweeping all before him, and setting up a new order, in which the wicked no longer prospered and the righteous, such as himself, were saved. What he saw instead was a soft but steady breeze, blowing to and fro, with a healing here and a message of love and forgiveness there. One word from Jesus and the walls of John's prison could come tumbling down. But that is not the way Jesus works.

We would all love to have a Messiah who conformed to our wishes and expectations, one who would answer our questions, rescue the innocent and put the guilty in their places. We long for one who will come and heal this broken world, knock a lot of heads together and in one fell swoop take charge. One glance at the evening news is enough to tell us that putting humans in charge of the world was a nice idea that hasn't worked. Now more than ever we need a strong, no nonsense and assertive Messiah.

That great theologian Woody Allen once remarked, "The worst thing you can say about God is that he is an underachiever." When we look at the Messiah who tells stories, invites us to find our own answers, who offers second, third and fourth chances to the guilty and leaves us to deal with the consequences of our actions, we may be inclined to agree.

The state of the world is such that many people are tempted to despair. But look more closely. Every now and then, in surprising places, amazing things may happen. People who were blind to God's love learn to see. People who were paralysed with fear become buoyed up with hope. People who were deaf to God's words learn to hear the Good news. And best of all, when good things happen, it is not the work of one lonely Messiah, but the work of millions of his followers: faithful people who refuse to give in to despair, but continue to work for a better world.

And blessed are those who take no offence at him. Blessed are those who do not let the vain imaginations of their hearts blind them to the Messiah who is in their midst. Blessed are those who open their ears to his message of hope for us all. And blessed are those who walk with him along the way of peace and love.

Amen

Martha Taft Golden  
St. Mary's, Holmbury  
and St. John's, Wotton  
15<sup>th</sup> December 2019