

Are you for real Jesus? Are you the one? *Message for Advent 3. Based on Matthew 11. 2-11*

Last week's gospel reading, if you recall, was the fire and brimstone prophet John the Baptist. He is baptizing all those who are coming to him to repent—confess their sins and be baptized, baptism an ancient Jewish rite, the symbolic way of being washed of your sin. Kind of like starting again with a clean slate, so to speak. And all this in preparation for the coming of the Messiah, the one from God who will save them. Makes sense, if you're expecting to meet God, you'd like your soul and body to be as pure as possible, wouldn't you? And the temple leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees decide they best too jump on this bandwagon that is attracting the people. John calls them out on their pretend devoutness; he knows their hearts and souls aren't in it, they're just going through the motions. And he accuses them of being no better than a brood of vipers, poisonous snakes, and threatens them with the fires of hell for their insincerity and false piety. 'Them's fightin' words' wouldn't you say?

And today in our gospel reading, we have fast forwarded a couple of years or so to John the Baptizer, now behind bars, a prisoner of King Herod. And John has heard about what Jesus has been doing—word about Jesus' amazing miracles travelled even into the jail. John sends his disciples to go to Jesus and ask him: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"(v.3) Don't you find this a strange question coming from John? This is the man who baptized Jesus, but didn't really want to because he felt it was Jesus who should be baptizing him; the man who was there when the heavens opened and the spirit of God descended upon Jesus like a dove, and John must have heard God announce that Jesus is his son, in whom he is well pleased. If anyone at all, you would think that John would absolutely know who Jesus was. What ever has happened? Has John turned into a doubter, maybe lacking in faith? It seems he's no longer sure of who Jesus is—so unsure that he sends his own disciples to confirm it. Is Jesus really the one? Is he for real? Is John, this fire and brimstone, camel clothed wearing hermit of a prophet having an existential crisis?

Quite possibly, or why else would he send his disciples to ask? John the Baptist finds himself in a new and extremely unhappy place. The prophet of the wilderness, now cooped up in a jail cell, with a very uncertain future. We know how his story ends, don't we? Herod has him beheaded. I suspect John was very much aware of his pending fate, and may well have been contemplating those big questions of life. Physically, his surroundings are horrid; emotionally he was probably stressed to the max, and spiritually — well, sounds like he's questioning that too. John goes from declaring Jesus as the Messiah, to wondering if Jesus is really the one. Has he lost his faith in Jesus? It wouldn't be surprising if he did, given his situation.

We do that too don't we? Changing life circumstances change our responses, change the questions we ask ourselves, and our God. We sometimes even question if God is there, and if so, where? When life throws us curve balls, or sends our lives into a tail spin, when we feel like we've lost control—be it a life threatening illness, loss of a loved one, loss of employment, loss of a relationship or just too many stressors in our lives, our confidence and trust can turn to despair and uncertainty. Our faith can waver when we are overwhelmed. And we maybe even fear for the future. It is the human condition—happens to the best of us. Even prophets it seems.

So what does John do? He goes to Jesus the best way he knows how, through his trusted friends.

And what does Jesus do? How does he respond? John's question is more than just a questioning of his faith; it is a plea for reassurance, for understanding. And that's what Jesus does, reassures John, and John's followers and his own disciples. He tells John's disciples to tell John what they have witnessed, come to know and understand about Jesus: that " " 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." (v 5,6) Jesus quotes from the book of Isaiah, the book that foretold the coming of

the Messiah, and what the Messiah would do when he came. Jesus reassures John, restoring his faith using the scriptures. It is the scriptures, the word of the Lord, that holds the words of our faith, the reassurance that in the midst of pain, of trouble, of life's messy, difficult circumstances, God is there. Jesus' presence comes to us when we pray, but if we are so overwhelmed that we can't seem to receive that, well, Jesus uses other ways and means—the beauty of God's creation, the face of a baby, the anointing of holy oil, the bread and wine of Holy Eucharist, and in the comfort and presence of loved ones or friends. And that's what coming together to worship in Christ's name does, the synergy of us all together, strengthening the Holy Spirit's presence in this place for us all.

Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt can be the catalyst to stronger faith, a deeper faith when we ask, when we cry out for the reassurance that yes Jesus is there for us. And Jesus comes. Jesus knows and understands our pain, our grief, our heartache, our doubts and fears.

In Advent we ponder and we celebrate the coming of the Messiah into our lives. The Saviour King—not a conquering overpowering force that takes charge and takes over; but the King of Peace, Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” The Messiah who comes to us, who walks beside us, along with us, supporting us, holding us, reassuring us, helping us in the middle of the troubles and difficulties that can lock us away in ourselves, from others, and from God. The peace of Christ brings light to the dark places that we can find ourselves in.

The message of Advent, the time before Christmas, is the annual reminder that Jesus is coming.

It is also the reminder that yes, the King of Peace, Emmanuel is here. Amen.

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