

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (A)
REASSURING JOHN THE BAPTIST (MT 11:2FF.)

Introduction

John the Baptist introduced Jesus to the public scene. He was massively important in his own right however. He is to be understood against the background of Old Testament believing expectations. He presented himself like the prophet Elijah (though he denied that he was Elijah (Jn 1:21), and even though Matthew wrote that Jesus said to the disciples that John was Elijah returned (Mt 11:14). He resembled Elijah by the poor way he was dressed, what he ate, where he was located and the issues he addressed. He gathered a group of disciples about him to further his mission. (Some scholars think that Jesus was originally one of these disciples, and that the Qumran Community influenced both of them). The Baptist initiated a momentous reform. People flocked to listen to him. They made a public declaration of agreement with him by accepting baptism as a sign of it. Those who had a lot to lose feared him, and above all King Herod Antipas, whom he criticised for being immoral, in taking Herodias his brother's wife, having divorced his own wife, the daughter of Aretas the neighbouring Nabatean king. That had sparked off a war that Herod lost. Herod perceived John as politically dangerous. At first he imprisoned him. Ultimately he had him killed. It is during this period in prison that the Baptist sends his delegation to Jesus with his fundamental question concerning his messianic identity. That is the subject of this morning's Gospel.

Comparing John and Jesus

To the public at that time Jesus and John seemed very much alike; both wandering preachers with a seemingly identical message, creating identical expectations (Mk 6:14ff.; Mt 16:13ff.). But first of all there are real differences between them: Jesus was from Galilee in the north, and John from Judea in the south. John came from a priestly family; Jesus did not. According to Luke's Gospel (Lk 1:36) they were cousins, but this is not mentioned in any other Gospel. Both were taken to be prophets. Both had disciples, dedicated to changing society, and they taught them how to pray to God. While both were socially involved, 'John did no miracles' (Jn 10:41) while Jesus worked countless miracles. The evangelists do not even agree that John baptised Jesus (Mk 1:9; Mt 3:16; Lk 3:21; Jn 1:29-34), nor that John kept on baptising after Jesus came on the scene (Jn 4:1-3).

Since the Gospels were written to show primarily who Jesus was, his superiority of origin and relation with God was stressed by them. The Gospels proclaim that in the person of Jesus the decisive intervention by God in human history took place. In himself he is the kingdom of God and the realisation of the goal of history. What he says and what he does is what St. Paul describes as 'God in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor 5:18). In John's Gospel he is the Word who dwelt amongst us (Jn 1:14). It was seemingly Jesus' missionary style that caused the Baptist's doubts. Was it that Jesus' way of being the Messiah was too inclusive and not austere enough for him? There were very different ideas then among the Jews as to what a future Messiah might be like. In fact the Baptist, whether he suspected it or not, in his own suffering and rejection in prison, foreshadowed Jesus in almost

every way. Jesus said that no greater than John the Baptist had lived until the Kingdom of God came (Mt 11:11). What Jesus said and did were the signs that he alone was God's Messiah. There had been no expectation at all of a suffering Messiah. Were the suffering experience of Jesus just like the suffering of John then we would only have a history of tragedy. One had to acknowledge who Jesus claimed to be, and was, and believe that he brought universal salvation. John was marvellous; Jesus said so. But John only ushered in the Person bringing salvation; he was not that Person. He needed assurance; Jesus did not. The new age began with Jesus, and he lived it freely, openly, differently. It was like new wine. He was not an ascetic; there was no fasting while he was with his disciples. He did not separate himself and live in the desert; he did not merely denounce the social iniquities of the rich and powerful. He healed all, he preached and related with everyone. This was the gospel of Christian freedom, the freedom to accept the passion and death. The resurrection was fundamental to the good news, its vindication. Now the message could go to all nations (Mt 28:20).

Implications

The Gospel today gives us a moment in the suffering doubt of the Baptist. It is typical of many who could not and cannot understand what Jesus was up to. Why was it not possible to bring fire down from heaven and destroy the tyrants then? Why suffer the Hitlers and the Stalins of this world? Why the useless waste of human life? Of course the blind see, and the lame walk and the poor have the Gospel preached to them. This was revolutionary stuff; but it was not enough to explain Jesus. 'Blessed are those who are not scandalised in me', said Jesus (Mt 11:6). He did nothing to save himself from the powers who were threatened by his deportment and his preaching. He was 'the man for others'. We are helped by the Baptist's doubts and the reassurance from Our Lord. The Baptist had challenged the big powers, the aristocrats who exploited the poor, the king who feared that his popular influence would destabilise his authority, all those who refused or insincerely accepted reform and consequently change the social fabric of a self serving society. From early on Christians celebrated the Baptist as a saint. In some ways our own times are more like Palestine than we might have suspected.

On Gaudete Sunday we see the best in all humanity at this time of the year: Doctors without Frontiers risking themselves for others, the sick made comfortable, soup kitchens available with a party spirit, the homeless welcomed, goodness applauded and honoured by all. Let us rejoice always in the Lord, so grateful for what we have received and what we may be able to give. Amen.

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