

### **“Go and Tell” – Mt 11:2-11 – Advent 3 – Dec 16, 2007**

Things were not going well for John. It had been rough at times – in fact, rough most of the time, but this time it looked pretty bad. In prison, with the Governor after his head, this time it looked pretty serious. He’d had a hard life up until now – driven by his faith, driven by who knows what voices, what voice, into the desert.. Driven back out of the desert by the same forces of faith to proclaim a message of the coming of the Messiah. Tough food, rough clothing, thronging crowds, attacks from church and state – no, it had been a short life, but not sweet.

And yet it was not all bad. People had heard his message to repent, to prepare themselves for the coming of the one who would follow. They had heard, and better yet, had reacted, had responded by confessing their sins, repenting of them and signaling their response through being baptized in the Jordan. To be sure, there were plenty of people, especially the ones who professed a faith in God, who continued obliviously along their path, certain and sure that they knew what was right, especially what was right for others.

But things were definitely not going well. Arrested, dumped into prison, awaiting a probable death. Had it been worth it? Could he have been wrong? Where was the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one, the promised one that he was so sure would arrive any day? Would that saviour arrive in time to save him? It had all seemed so real, so urgent. He was sure that the Messiah would arrive, perhaps had already arrived, to bring peace to a land torn apart by warfare and strife, to bring justice to God’s people suffering under the boots of a foreign oppressor, to bring retribution to the wicked and restoration to the righteous.

His excitement, his urgency had been shared by others, had infected thousands. Rapt followers and dedicated disciples had listened to his every word, had supported him, had worked with him in spreading the news of the coming promised one. They stood by him still, even as things seemed to be coming completely unglued, even as events wound down a dark spiral in this prison.

Naturally enough, many had surfaced claiming to be the one – it seemed every week there was one more who would loudly claim the title of messiah, grasp for the adoration. But not one of these would-be Messiahs could stand the test of time – not one of them could hold up to simple questioning, let alone any serious investigation.

And yet ... and yet there was one who seemed genuine enough. Certainly he had attracted large crowds of devout followers. The rumours about him were increasing every day, every day new stories of what he had done filtered even through the thick walls of the forbidding prison. John had to know. In what could possibly be the closing hours of his life, he had to find out if he had been right, if the urgent call he had felt to proclaim the nearness of the one coming in God’s name had been as real as it felt.

And so he sent his closest followers, ones he could trust to ask the tough questions, ones who would not be easily fooled, who would not be swept up and deceived by emotions. John sent them to ask this Jesus of Nazareth “are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” This was no idle question. The very nature of the question reveals that John was willing to consider Jesus at least a prophet. His disciples asking, “are we to wait for another?” seems a signal that John was at least willing to consider Jesus as being someone who would pick up his mantle of proclaiming the Messiah. But John was still hopeful – “are you the one who was to come?”, is the key question. Is this Jesus the one, or just the latest in a series of popular candidates? Is it possible for John to hope that his prophecy might be fulfilled in his own lifetime? Is it even possible for John to have some affirmation, some certainty in his hope?

Jesus answered John in the best way he could. Instead of standing on a pedestal, beating his chest and declaring in a loud proclamation, “yes, I am the one!” Instead of long pontifical speeches

and dramatic theatrics, Jesus invites John's disciples to see for themselves. Jesus provides the only answer that could bring John the hope for which he was searching, and possibly even some joy in the midst of his darkness. Jesus answered John from scripture, pointing to his deeds as fulfillment of scriptural prophecy. He tells John's disciples to report what they 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.

Unfortunately, people tend to get stuck on the miraculous nature of these affirmations, and miss not only the concluding message of good news to the poor, but also miss the relevance of Jesus' answer for us. Set aside for a moment that some of these deeds seem only divinely possible, and recognize that these are accomplishments. These are not just claims to power, these affirmations offered by Jesus are not just talk, they are done deeds. "See for yourself," he tells John's disciples, "and then report back what you have seen done." Where the steady stream of false messiah's offered loud declarations of power and gimmicks, Jesus pointed to already-accomplished practical demonstrations of the power of God at work in him – not to mention a blessing as well to those not offended by him.

We don't know what John's reaction was to his disciples' reports about Jesus, as it isn't reported in Matthew's gospel. However, we are left in no doubt as to what Jesus thought about John. According to what Jesus went on to tell the crowd, John was no trendy dude, following the fashion of the moment, or being blown where the wind would take him. In Jesus' words, John was not just a prophet, but more than a prophet, one to whom even other prophets pointed, and was indeed the one who held a unique place at the opening of the messianic age.

Whatever John's reaction was to Jesus' answer – and I think we can assume he was content with the answer – it is important for us to pay attention to that answer, for with it Jesus provides a model for our faith. "Go and tell what you hear and see" Jesus told John's disciples, and the same instruction is relevant for those who today are wondering if Jesus is the messiah. And what is it that they are going to "hear and see?" And from whom?

Ahh, now it comes a little clearer why Jesus' answer is important for us, doesn't it? Those who are seeking the messiah will need to "hear and see" Christ's love at work in and through us, won't they? They, like John's disciples, will most surely be assured that Jesus is the messiah if they hear and see that God's love in Christ is being fulfilled through actions, not just words. As they are able to hear and see that the naked are clothed, the hungry are fed, the lonely and grieving are comforted, the weak are uplifted, that justice is being done they too will be able to "go and tell" that they have seen the continuing work of the true Messiah, even Christ Jesus.

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?", was the question posed to Jesus by John's disciples. We are blessed in that we know the answer to that question. We know how Jesus' ministry continued to unfold, we have the assurance in His resurrection of our own. We have all the affirmation we need that Jesus is indeed the one who came, and who will come again. Now it is our turn to "go and tell" – not only with our words, but with our actions. Our turn to go and tell through love in action that Jesus is indeed the one, the Christ, the Messiah. It is our turn to proclaim with grateful appreciation that we celebrate him as Emmanuel, the incarnation of God's unbounded love, offering the wonders of His Kingdom to all who would accept. Now is our time to join with all the faithful in affirming that we have been touched by His love and mercy, that we too have been healed, that even in a world beset by problems we experience the peace He has promised, that we hear His unbreakable covenant of love for us, that we see how He has opened our eyes to the wonders of His Kingdom. Now we are called in turn to step out boldly in our faith, to "go and tell what we see and hear," that Jesus the Messiah is born in Bethlehem.