

“Affirming Faith” – Mt 11:2-11 – Advent 3 – Dec 15, 2013

I hope you remembered me saying over the past couple of weeks that we need to set aside what we think we know about John the Baptist in order to hear what Matthew is saying about him and through him. I hope so, because we need to do that again today. If we can do that, if we can for a moment at least set aside any belief that we might hold that John and Jesus were not only cousins but well acquainted with each other, then we can begin to hear the power of John's question and Jesus' answer in today's reading.

Once you've cleared your mind, begin anew by realizing that things were not going well for John. It had been rough at times – in fact, it had been rough most of the time throughout his ministry, but this time it looked pretty bad. In prison, with the Governor after his head, this time it looked pretty serious. John had had a hard life up until now – driven by his faith, driven by who knows what voices and urgings into the desert. Driven back out of the desert by 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, his had been a short but not sweet life.

And yet it was not all bad. There were some good signs. 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, they had reacted and had responded by confessing their sins, repented of those misdeeds, and sealed their responses through being baptized in the Jordan. To be sure, there were plenty of people, especially the ones who professed a faith in God, who after such powerful conversions continued obliviously along their path, certain and sure that they knew what was right, and especially what was right for others.

But things were definitely not going well for John. 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, if not more. Rapt followers, dedicated disciples had listened to his every word, had supported him, had worked with him in spreading the news of the coming promised one, and 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, others had surfaced claiming to be the one – it seemed every week there was another who would claim the title, grasp for the adoration. But it looked as if not one of these would-be Messiahs could stand the test of time – it seemed that 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 just 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 at least willing to consider Jesus a ‘mere’ prophet rather than the expected Messiah. His disciples affirmed that uncertainty, asking, “are we to wait for another?” and signaling that John was prepared to affirm Jesus as being someone who would pick up his mantle of proclaiming the Messiah rather than being the one proclaimed. But for all of that uncertainty, 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? Was it possible for John to hope that his prophecy might be fulfilled in his own lifetime? Was it possible for John to have some affirmation, some certainty in his hope?

Spoiler alert – yes! To give John the affirmation he was seeking, Jesus answered John in the best way he could. He didn’t stand proudly, beating his chest and declaring in a loud proclamation, “yes, I am the one!” Instead of such shallow theatrics Jesus invites John’s disciples to see for themselves, and in doing so 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. Jesus declares that the good signs foretold by Isaiah had indeed been demonstrated.

The way that Jesus answered John was vitally important for several reasons. The first is the affirmation from scripture; John was a classic prophet, understanding his role as the deliverer of a message from God, a role that had been well defined by all of the affirmed prophets before him whose proclamations and affirmations had been documented in scripture. For John it was absolutely critical that the anticipated Messiah must not only be a continuation of scriptural tradition but the culmination of it.

In addition, Jesus’ answer was evidential – instead of any unsubstantiated claim to be the Messiah, Jesus simply declares, “look and see for yourself.” Look, observe, notice that the very deeds that scripture declared would identify the individual as the fulfillment of prophecy were actually being accomplished. Instead of an egotistic “yes, I am the one!” Jesus answers with a solidly affirming, “the proof is in the doing”

Did that answer satisfy John? We don’t know – we can’t know. I for one would like to think that the answer John’s disciples brought back to the prison brought comfort to John, brought him some assurance, but we cannot know for certain. John would have to make up his own mind as to whether Jesus was the promised one.

It’s easier for us to decide that Jesus was the true messiah. While we don’t know what John thought about Jesus, 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 a prophet among prophets, one to whom even other prophets pointed, and was indeed the one who held a unique place at the opening of the messianic age. And so the one to whom John pointed, Jesus, is affirmed here as the true Messiah.

Even so, there are still plenty of moments in our lives when, like John, we sit in a darkness not of our own making. There are even plenty of times when we sit in darkness that is of our own making! I’m sure most if not all of us from time to time wonder whether our faith is real, whether God cares about us. If you have never experienced that kind of anxiety, those kind of doubts, then I pray that you will continue to be so blessed, and that you never will experience that darkness. But if you’re like the rest of us (like most of us, I would contend), then you can understand from your own experiences the doubt, the uncertainty that John must have felt. It’s

not so much a harsh, “it’s all untrue!”, but a more insidious niggling that perhaps it might be true for others but not quite for us, that God actually loves the world enough to send his very Son that we might have life. Moments when we think, “God may love the world, but how can I believe he loves me?”

“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. Not only the good signs of fulfilled prophecy – the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, are good signs, but the accounts of the risen Christ provide the ultimate answer to the question, and so we can know with a certainty that John could not share that Jesus indeed was, and is, and will be the One for whom the world waited, and for whom we await again.

This is why it is so important in this season of Advent that we look again so closely at John the Baptist. John experienced an incredible sense of waiting with urgency, of hope and expectation that into a troubled world, into troubled lives, God would fulfill His promises uttered through the lips of His prophets and send the anointed one to usher in His Holy Kingdom. The anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ did indeed come to fulfill that promise, not in some thunderous cosmic blast, but unexpectedly in the form of a wee child born in a backwoods village, and laid gently in a manger.

We live in times that aren’t much different from John’s day – the world is still full of warfare and strife, with peoples living under the boots of oppressors, with families trying to eke out a living under the threats of terrorism, whether from self-appointed militias or self-gratifying economic empires. The world continues to have more than enough who suffer from being lame, or blind, or diseased. And yet, unlike John, we know that the one promised has indeed come, and thus have certainty that He will come again, ushering in the Heavenly Kingdom for all time.

It is with that sense of hopeful anticipation of the peace that He will bring when He returns that we are able to celebrate with joy each year at this time the birth of the one we affirm as Lord and Saviour, Jesus the Christ. It is with grateful appreciation that we acknowledge him as Emmanuel, the incarnation of God’s unbounded love, offering the wonders of His Kingdom to all who would accept. We join with all the faithful in proclaiming that we also 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, and how we may step out boldly in our faith, no longer crippled by doubts and insecurity. As we move closer to Christmas Eve and Christmas Day filled with the joy of anticipation, feel the excitement build as we celebrate the answer to the question, “are you the one?” with joyful celebrations and affirmations that Jesus is indeed Emmanuel, God with us.