

Jesus said, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see'.

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Advent 3 A: Mt 11 2-11

Jesus said, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ 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.

What is there not to like? And yet John seemed worried that Jesus might not really be 'the one who is to come'.

John the Baptist had been put in prison by Herod Antipas – son of Herod the Great who we meet at Christmas. Today's Herod was a puppet ruler who longed to be king. John was in prison because he'd told off Herod for marrying his brother's wife. John was never one for political correctness; we saw that in last week's gospel reading. But then no Hebrew prophet ever was. Even so, what John said to Herod was more risky than average, even for a prophet. You don't publicly correct a man who thinks he should be a king and expect to get away with it.

So when we meet John in his prison cell, realistically speaking, there are two things you can be sure will be on his mind. Firstly, that his death was likely very soon, and secondly, great concern about what may become of his message after he's killed.

In a traditional prison, food and drink is provided by friends and family when they visit. That's how it was in John's time, and it still is in prisons and hospitals around the majority world today. John's friends, his family and his disciples, would have brought him what he needed. And when they did, they'd also have brought him news of the mission. Much of that

news would have concerned the ministry of Jesus, whom John had proclaimed to be the 'coming one' – ie, the Messiah.

John had proclaimed that the promised Messiah would come with a bang. Last week, we heard John's powerful metaphor: the axe was lying at the root of unfruitful trees ready to cut them down so they could be cast into the fire – such would be the judgement handed down by the coming one.

And if that weren't enough, when 'the one who is to come' arrives,

Mt 3.12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

This certainly didn't seem to tally with the news about Jesus that his disciples and friends would have brought to John in prison. Languishing in his cell, John would have been told of the ministry of 'Jesus the Messiah' – the one he baptised and declared to be 'the coming one'. But there was no word of the final judgement.

Naturally, John is worried, so he sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus: ³*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*

⁴ *Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see:*
⁵ *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. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'*

John had expected a fiery judgement. He believed God had sent him to proclaim that judgement; to call people to repent and to prepare for the coming Kingdom. Yet from the message Jesus sent him, it sounded as if the Kingdom had already arrived –

but without the judgement; without the apocalypse. And that left John confused. How can the blessings and rewards be doled out before it's been established who deserves them? How can the sequence of justice and just rewards suddenly get subverted like that?!

This sort of confusion pinpoints a tension that runs through the Scriptures – particularly the Gospels – between what is happening now, and what will happen in eternity. This often gets called the tension between the *already* and the *not yet*. It's a tension which has implications for our own theologies, and it surfaces at difficult times and places for each of us – at funerals, in hospitals, in places when we witness terrible injustice or undeserved suffering – times and places when our perspective is forcibly changed, and peace won't come any more.

I sometimes feel that tension at funerals. People are there who feel cheated, afraid, remorseful, bewildered – they want some peace. Maybe peace will come if they can feel sure that the person who died is at peace. But the Scriptures maintain the tension; for every passage that teaches that the person who died is with God now, there's another to say they're just resting, and waiting for the general resurrection and the great judgement on the last day? I remember a funeral where the preacher threw his hands in the air at one point and said, "We don't know where our friend is right now." He was right to say this.

The scriptures witness to at least these two scenarios. Has the Kingdom arrived yet? Is there to be a final judgement? Living with the tension of those two possibilities is part of the paradox of the life of faith. For many people, this tension is a real agony. That's what I imagine it was like for John. We never get to hear how he received Jesus' reply: ⁵ *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. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me."

I don't think he'd have found it an easy message to receive. He'd put his life on the line particularly in the service of calling people back to ethical lifestyles. Wasn't he languishing in prison for these principles?! And yet here were people being healed and blessed willy-nilly, with no apparent hint that they'd amended their lives first. There was no assurance for him that these people deserved the blessings Jesus was showering on them. Where was the justice in that? Where was the judgement?

Why was Jesus bringing in the Kingdom of wholeness and healing – the *not yet* – without first clearing up the *already* – the burning issues of ethics and social justice. This is a perfectly reasonable question. And today, as we have the opportunity to spend time asking it with John, and through him, asking it together with the hundreds of millions of people in today's world who can't even begin to hope, and who won't be able to until they have seen some justice done.

John's question is a real, legitimate question of faith. The main lesson I draw from this passage is that although Jesus' answer challenged John to look beyond his question, he didn't rebuke him for asking it. Those words, *And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me* could be seen as a very mild caution, but then Jesus praised John as the greatest person born of women.

We should be reassured by this; that it's no sin to cry out to God for justice. It may sound strange that I feel moved to say something so obvious. But many people I meet feel that it's a sin to complain to God about anything. They've been duped into thinking it's a sign of faithlessness on their part to ask God the WHY questions. Often that cruel falsehood has become a prison to them.

John the Baptist can encourage us to send messages to God from such prisons when we find ourselves locked in them. It's okay to question God. The worst that can happen is a return message telling us of the certainty of God's compassion:

³...*"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"*

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In the dialogue between John the Baptist and Jesus, judgement and healing are brought into dialogue in a new and illuminating way. In this dialogue, both judgement and healing are revealed to be ways to peace with God both in the now and in the not yet.

I wonder if that addresses any of our questions, or if we haven't asked them yet. Amen