

St Marc, Grenoble
Sunday 11th December 2022 Advent 3
Isaiah 35: 1 - 10
Matthew 11: 2 - 11
'The One?'

Good Morning, Welcome - whether you are here in the building, or joining us on Zoom.
Let's PRAY

It is interesting; John the Baptist's place in the history of Jesus' ministry on earth is usually highlighted in the church season of Advent (preparation and coming); yet, we often also seem to speak of him as much in Lent, which is another season of preparation in the church year - preparing for Easter and the time of Jesus' final sacrifice on earth.

Please tell me: What do You make of John the Baptist? What do you know about him? What do you think his role was?

John the Baptist is one of the really colourful characters in the Gospels; dressed in prophet's clothes of camel hair, and eating insects and honey – he sometimes reminds me of a first century equivalent of one of the virtual reality TV shows, like 'I'm a celebrity, Get me out of here'!

But, in some ways that does rather trivialise his role. Because John the Baptist's mission - in the truest sense of the word, was vitally important for announcing Jesus' Messianic arrival and releasing Him into His 'earth changing, or earth shattering' ministry of proclamation and promise and redemption and healing.

John himself sometimes seemed confused about what his exact role was. In this passage, he even seems unsure whether he has correctly understood his vocation, his calling, and if Jesus actually is 'The One' John was waiting for.

Despite Jesus being his cousin, whom he baptised in the Jordan, and the subsequent appearance of the Holy Spirit, John seems uncertain, at this point, that Jesus is the Messiah – yet, he'd been pretty definite, when he baptised Jesus; that this was the 'One to come'!

Of course, it's possible that being incarcerated in King Herod's jail had distorted his understanding, or his vision, and his sense of reality and purpose.

Possibly to reassure himself, he sent his own disciples with a message for Jesus; quite an odd question – are you really *THE ONE*? (Is it really you?) Or, should we expect someone else?

When I was a child, of about eight or nine, my family went to spend a weekend with my Godmother, who had two sons, somewhat older and rather rougher than me. It was decided that we boys should play a game, called: 'Are you there Moriarty?'

The idea of the game was that two blindfolded opponents lay head to head on the floor, face down, with a rolled up newspaper in their hand. You then took it in turns to shout out: 'Are you there Moriarty?'

The object of the game slowly became clearer to me, because it wasn't explained very well at the beginning (and I've always been a bit slow with such things!) The idea was for you to respond and then dodge, or move quickly, or you got whacked by your opponent's newspaper! I can remember ending up with quite a headache because I didn't dodge fast enough!!

For some reason, in my mind's eye, I've always associated this question, which John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus, with that game – 'Are you the One?? –or is there someone else to come?

But, as so often happened with Jesus, He didn't give a straight 'yes' or 'no' response; probably because, for various reasons, He was not ready at that moment to openly declare He is the Messiah and publicly, at least, He was dodging the issue.

Instead He told John's disciples to tell John what He (Jesus) was doing: making the blind see, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised *and* the good news is preached to (of all people), the poor and the sinners!!

In other words, this was an exact fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy around 700 years earlier; or, more correctly, after God had prophesied it through Isaiah.

Then Jesus said something rather odd: "Blessed is the person who does not fall away on account of me." **What on earth do you think that means??**

I believe the point is that the Judean people had been awaiting their Messiah for hundreds of years. But no-one was expecting a Messiah like Jesus.

More like the prophecy we read in Isaiah this morning (35: 2,4) they expected a King who would 'come [to save them] with vengeance, and with divine retribution'.

Not a humble Messiah who'd ride into town on a donkey's foal, and start caring for the poor, the oppressed and the infirm.

It had never occurred to the Judeans that their Saviour would come in the shape of 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'. They were expecting a strong, powerful king who was going to kick out the Romans; and restore the sovereignty of their nation.

No wonder, when they met the real Jesus, many of them were shocked, and simply couldn't come to terms with His gentle and caring ministry, they weren't used to it, they didn't expect it!

The message from Jesus was loud and clear: 'Trust me! Don't be surprised; I'm going to do things differently.'

Sadly, many of the crowds following Jesus simply couldn't adjust and accept His ministry in this way. Of course, they were happy with His healings, they couldn't get enough of them.

But they also wanted their sovereignty back; and they wanted a strong, aggressive Messiah, who would lead an uprising against the Romans, and send them packing. So, many in the crowds turned their backs on Jesus, and went home.

Jesus' responded, "You're blessed if you stick with me! And the tasks I give you".

He challenged the people as to why and what they went out into the wilderness to see – they certainly didn't go to see a bugler from the Household Cavalry preparing for Jesus' arrival.

They actually went out to see John the Baptist – a ragged prophet, dressed in rough camel's hair clothes, and feeding on the wild fruits of the wilderness.

But, as we heard earlier, even John wasn't prepared for this countercultural Saviour who condemned the established religious leadership and turned their corrupt and controlling practices on their head and got on with healing the sick and proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God.

So, where does all that leave us this morning? Are we confused, unsure of where Jesus is leading us? Or are we blessed in our faith, and on fire for serving Jesus, in whatever counter cultural ministry He asks us to undertake?

As we go back out into Advent, let us be willing to accept His overwhelming love and compassion and be prepared to serve Him, whenever, however and whatever He asks us to do ... even if it isn't what we are used to, or what we expected!

Let's pray