

Mt. 11.2-11; Isaiah 35.1-10; James 5.7-10  
Sunday 11th December 2016 - 8 & 10 am  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent: St. Andrew's Totteridge.

*May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

John the Baptist is presented in the gospels as a prophet in the mould of Elijah, a 'voice of one crying out in the wilderness' (Mt.3.3). He lived in the desert; he wore a garment of camel's hair; his diet was locusts and wild honey, and his message was as stark and uncompromising as his appearance: "you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come. Bear fruit worthy of repentance..." (Mt.3.7-8)

Now this vivid imagery inspired medieval portrayals of hell and the terrifying language of apocalyptic "visionaries" & prophets of doom right down to our own day. We've all seen that guy with the placards in Oxford St. For John, this was real, the End Time was at hand: a time of retribution, vengeance and wrath. And he was not alone in this belief; there was much interest in the apocalyptic in the 1<sup>st</sup> c., and 'eschatology' generally as it is known, with many explorations of the idea of the end of ordinary reality and of reunion with the divine. We have only to look to Revelation 6:1-8 and 'the four horsemen of the Apocalypse' to see what ideas would arise.

John preached a God who was uncompromising in his demand for repentance and righteousness. He saw the Messiah with a winnowing fork in his hand, separating wheat from chaff – chaff that would be burned with unquenchable fire. The coming Day of the Lord would be 'Pay-Back Time Unlimited!'

Jesus began his ministry by following John. We see him in the gospels accepting baptism from his hands. But the apocalyptic is absent from Jesus' teaching. The God he came to reveal was very different from the God preached by John. And when John is incarcerated in prison he sends that plaintive, almost anxious question to Jesus, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' (Mt.11.3).

Well, Jesus could have denounced John's teaching in response, but he pointedly doesn't do this – there is no mismatch of expectations and events. Instead, he affirms that John has played an indispensable part in calling people out of their comfort zones into the wilderness, to hear and see harsh and stark things. No one would have gone into the desert just to admire the landscape, or to listen to someone in the clothing of the governing classes (Mt.11.7-8). They accepted the challenge of standing in the sun to listen to a prophet who spoke to them in uncompromising terms.

Jesus' message was similarly uncompromising, if couched in rather gentler language. He had come to bring the Good News of a loving, caring, merciful Father, who welcomed everyone to his banquet, of a Jesus who invited public sinners to his table, shared his food and his cup with tax-collectors and prostitutes, and spoke of going out onto the highways and byways, into the towns and villages, to search for the despised, the stray, the lost; to bring back to his Father's house those whom the religious professionals of the day found unacceptable.

When Jesus brings healing and restoration into the role that John sets out, it is in the context of repentance and return to God that John has demanded. And yet, important as John is in human terms, he holds no rank in the ‘kingdom of heaven’. John had already proclaimed himself unworthy to unfasten the Messiah’s sandals (Mt.2.11) and is prepared to diminish. He waits with us in humility through Advent as, thinking of the Collect of the Day, we pray to be found “an acceptable people in [Jesus’] sight.”

Jesus’ vision for the end time is not that of some great final catastrophe, but of a joyful, celebratory banquet, where all are made welcome, where there is food and fellowship in abundance (just think of how striking and attractive an image this is in the 1<sup>st</sup> C., when famine was an ever-present threat), and where the sick and the wounded find healing and refreshment.

And so I want to leave you with an important question. As we look forward to the coming of the Messiah this Advent, I believe we are presented with a challenge - a choice between the message of John the Baptist and the message of Jesus. How do we see the ‘End Time’ – both the cosmic ‘End-of-All-Time’, and also the end of our own personal time on earth? Do you see it as an impending judgment by a wrathful and avenging God, an interrogation to see if we have ‘kept all the rules’, ticked all the correct religious boxes, and observed all the correct rituals? Or do you see it as a warm welcome to the eternal home by a loving, caring, forgiving and merciful Father? Amen.

## Mt. 11.2-11

2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples<sup>3</sup> and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see:<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?<sup>8</sup> What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.<sup>9</sup> What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.<sup>10</sup> This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."<sup>11</sup> Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

## James 5.7-10

7 Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.<sup>8</sup> You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.<sup>9</sup> Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors!<sup>10</sup> As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

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