

The one who is to come?

Our gospel reading today might seem a bit of an odd one for the third Sunday in advent, because it takes place in the middle of Jesus' ministry, and it begins with John the Baptist seeking to find out if Jesus really is the messiah, 'the one who is to come'.

It's a reasonable question to ask, and no doubt there would have been many people witnessing Jesus' ministry, and wondering if, in fact, Jesus was the messiah.

It's a reasonable question, but it is a bit odd that it would be John seeking to find out.

Remember, this is John who preached in the wilderness, who prepared the way of the Lord, who baptised with water and told the people that the one to come after him would baptise with fire and the Holy Spirit. And this is John who saw his cousin, Jesus, approach him at the Jordan river and recognised him for who he was, declaring "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) and who would have heard the voice from heaven saying about Jesus, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt 3:17)

And Jesus was John's own cousin. John was the first to recognise Jesus – we read in Luke's gospel that John leapt for joy in Elizabeth's womb, when John's mother Elizabeth met Mary who was pregnant with Jesus.

Amazing stuff.

But time passes. Memories fade. Perhaps doubts begin to creep in. Jesus had gone off teaching and healing and casting out demons, in the towns and the countryside and Andrew and Simon Peter and perhaps others had gone off with him. And John's ministry had declined. He'd been in open conflict with king Herod. John had rebuked Herod for marrying Herodias, the ex-wife of his brother Philip.

Herod, it seems, was a proud and insecure man, and so he had John imprisoned, stopping any further public criticism. It's likely that Herod took care of his prisoner, though – possibly probably because he was afraid of John (maybe because Herod recognised him as a prophet, or maybe just because John was quite popular with the people) – because John was clearly able to have visitors and send his disciples on the mission that we've heard of today.

We read that when John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (11:2-3)

John's own ministry had been preaching in the wilderness by the Jordan, calling people to repentance and baptising them, and that had a huge impact on the nation of Israel – the

gospel accounts tell us of multitudes going to hear John and be baptised. But Jesus' ministry was different: rather than the people going to John, Jesus was going to the people. And while John's ministry was preaching and baptising, Jesus' was so much more.

Just skipping through Matthew's gospel so far...

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. (4:23)

Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him. (4:25)

The wonderful teaching of the sermon on the mount (5-7)

Healing the leper, the centurion's servant and others in Chapter (8).

The calming of the storm. (8)

The casting of the Gadarene demons into the herd of pigs (8)

The healing of the paralysed man and the haemorrhagic woman

The raising from the dead of the synagogue leader's daughter

The healing of the blind men

The healing of the mute man

Amazing stuff.

But even so, it seems John wasn't certain – he needed to ask the question. Don't forget that John wasn't getting Matthew's gospel to read, and there weren't any newspapers to read, or TV news bulletins. It would have all been word of mouth, and would have reached John second hand at best – remember he was now in prison.

But despite the amazing things that Jesus was doing, they were not the things that were popularly expected of the Messiah.

Jesus, he wasn't marching at the head of a column of soldiers, he wasn't raising an army, he wasn't attacking the Romans. He was simply travelling, teaching in synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing diseases and infirmities and casting out demons. It was revolutionary stuff, sure, but not revolutionary in the way the nation of Israel – and probably John – expected.

And so John sent his disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

Are you the one who is to come?

Jesus was the one of course, but he didn’t simply say, “Yes, I am”. Instead, he says to John’s disciples “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” (11:4-5)

Go back and report to John what you hear and see.

Go and be witnesses.

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.

This is the fulfilment of the prophecy we heard in our Old Testament reading today, “your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.”

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.” (Isaiah 35:4b-6)

We had another prophecy from Isaiah (11:6-7) last week:

“The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.”

You might remember I commented that it’s about Jesus changing the accepted order of the world. Solving the problems and the pain and the hurt of the world. The imagery used by Isaiah is absolutely outside the natural order of things – leopards don’t lie down with goats, lions don’t eat straw. It just doesn’t happen. Isaiah was sharing a vision of peace beyond that which occurs as part of the world we know.

But in his prophecy from chapter 35, we can see fulfilled in what Jesus did. In the natural order of things is that the eyes of the blind aren’t opened, and the ears of the deaf are stopped, the lame don’t – can’t – leap like a deer, and neither can mute tongues shout for joy.

But as John's disciples witnessed, through Jesus, the blind did receive sight, the lame did walk, those who had leprosy were cleansed, the deaf could hear, and the dead were raised..."

The natural order of things was changed.

Go and share that good news.

The national and military aspects of what the nation of Israel expected of the messiah, just don't compare to what Jesus was doing. They may have wanted a military victory over their enemies, but here Jesus is delivering victory over blindness, paralysis, disease, deafness and even death!

Go back and report to John what you hear and see. Jesus doesn't need to say "Yes, I am the one" or "Of course I'm the Messiah!", because what Jesus has done made it clear. His actions made the truth clear.

And Jesus says in verse 6 "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." Or "...blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." In other translations.

Jesus' victory, Jesus' offer, is to everyone. If you don't reject Jesus, then you are blessed. It doesn't matter who you are, where or when you were born, the colour of your skin, your gender, your social status, or your age, if you don't reject Jesus, then you are blessed.

Matthew tells us that as John's disciples "...went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces." (11:7-8)

The people had gone out to the wilderness to hear John, and they had gone in multitudes. They'd listened to some harsh teaching. John had told them they needed to be baptised – and baptism was something would ever be required of gentiles, so telling Jewish people they needed to be baptised was quite confronted. But they responded, and they multitudes were baptised.

Even beyond what we read in the gospel accounts, the Jewish historian Josephus noted the procession of the Jewish people to the baptism of John in the Jordan. John's presence and ministry were a major upheaval in the life of the nation of Israel.

And John certainly wasn't dressed in fine clothes or living grandly – Matthew tells us in Chapter 3 that ... John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey (3:4)

Jesus asks the people “Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’” (11:9-10)

Jesus confirms that John is a prophet. Jesus, with all his authority, says that what John said was true.

Then Jesus adds “Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

John’s message was “Repent!” So was Jesus’. Jesus first words when he began his ministry were “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17). But there was a difference: John urged repentance because he thought judgment was at hand through the coming of the Lord. But Jesus, who is the Lord that came, urged repentance because salvation was at hand. The prophet Ezekiel put it well “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?”

I think we can relate: When the church’s primary message is that of judgement, it leads its own members to believe that the gospel is about their efforts to be good. So we become judgemental, we get angry with those we see as sinners, not over God being offended, but over sinners not being good like us. God’s commandments are essential to teach what is good and to guide us throughout our lives, but most of all they show us we can’t put things right through our own efforts – that we need help – we need a saviour.

The good news of gospel is that that Saviour has come!

As John 3:16 reminds us “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

And I think today’s reading is also a warning against another danger, and that is the danger of downplaying who Jesus was.

I think though, that today the approach is sometimes for people to bring God down to human level – to downplay or even ignore the supernatural aspects of the gospels – the healings, the miracles the casting of demons. To emphasise Jesus as a great teacher, and a man of peace.

But the very basis of our faith is a supernatural event: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Jesus’ ministry was marked not just by wise words, not just by reaching out to the outsiders – lepers, tax collectors, Samaritans, and women, and not just by confronting the religious authorities of the time – the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, but Jesus’ ministry was

marked by healing, miracles, the casting out of demons, the voice of God speaking from the heavens, and of course, the resurrection of the dead.

When John's disciples asked Jesus if he was the one who was to come, or were they to wait for another?" Jesus didn't say "Well, I've said some wise things" or "I've reached out to the lonely" or "I've confronted the authorities".

Instead, Jesus answered them, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor".

It is a complete package, the miracles and the message. And the miracles confirm the message.

In advent, as we look at all the prophecies concerning the Messiah, we see them fulfilled in Jesus. In his birth, in his life, in his death and in his resurrection. And we can look to their ultimate fulfilment in his return.

It is a complete package, the miracles and the message.

And the message is the good news. The gospel. And it is for us here, and for all people everywhere. And we get to be part of sharing that good news. We get to be like John's disciples.

Go and tell what you know: 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. And blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of Jesus.

Amen.