

*Are you he that is to come, or do we look for another?*

St. Matthew 11:3b

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This week's Gospel is all about identity. John seeks to know whether or not this man Jesus, whom he had once confidently called the 'Lamb of God', is the man that he had once thought he might be. Sitting in prison as his life draws to its end, knowing that King Herod has the power to have him put to death at any moment, on any pretext, John needs to know whether or not Jesus is the Christ; whether or not Jesus is the 'one that should come,' as our Gospel reading puts. But this week's Gospel speaks not just about who Jesus is; it also speaks about who John is. Because we cannot miss the doubt that has crept into John's voice. He who had once spoken so boldly, so confidently, to the crowds, calling them to repent; calling them to a profound re-ordering of their lives, seems to have lost some of his confidence; some of his boldness.

This week's Gospel speaks not just about Jesus' identity; it also speaks about who John is; the identity of he who had been sent to 'prepare the way of the Lord;' who had been sent to make ready the people of God for the coming of the Christ. John's identity as the forerunner of the Messiah hinges on Jesus' identity as that long-awaited Messiah; as the Christ.

So John sits in prison. Day and night, he is alone, with only his thoughts to keep him company. In his cold, dark, damp cell he waits for the Christ. Once upon a time he had been fairly certain. He had once called him the Lamb who would 'take away the sins of the world. He had once leapt in his mother's womb when the pregnant Mary had come to visit. He had once seen the Holy Spirit descend in the form of a dove; and had heard the voice of the Father at Jesus' baptism.

But as John sits in prison, knowing that his work will soon be done, perhaps he wonders not just about whether he has done his work well; maybe he begins to wonder whether it was his work in the first place. Had he really been called to prepare the way for the Christ? Had he really been called to prepare the hearts and souls of the people of God for the coming of their Saviour? Or had it all been a dream? Had he misunderstood his calling?

Because, as John sits in prison, he cannot help but see that so much of what he had once said, so much of his bold, confident proclamation had failed to come to pass. "Repent," John had cried to the crowds, "for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. But where was that Kingdom? Where was the purging fire that he had once promised? Where was the axe hewing down the tree of Israel's hypocrisy? John had once seen so much on the horizon; so much about to happen; but, as he sits alone in his cell, he cannot help but realise that the evidence for what was supposed to come to pass was fairly thin.

*Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?*

The answer that Jesus gives to John's question may seem at first glance like an effort to avoid the question. Maybe John is looking for a 'yes' or 'no' answer. But Jesus instead offers something more. Jesus challenges John to see the kingdom in

new ways; to see God's power differently; to see what John had previously missed; to see how the kingdom that God had promised; the kingdom that John had proclaimed, would be even greater than he had imagined. That stories of how the blind will be given sight and the lame will walk; of how lepers will be cleansed and the dead will rise to life; of how the poor will hear good news, spoke of something even greater than what John had seen; of how images of the broken being made whole and the wilderness blossoming into abundance spoke of the great re-ordering of humanity's disordered life that John had promised. Jesus challenges John to see what the Scriptures all along had been telling them.

For many years this Sunday has been called Gaudete Sunday. It takes its name from the Introit, from the Epistle to the Philippians, which was traditionally said or sung at the beginning of the Holy Eucharist:

*Gaudete in Domino semper; iterum dico Gaudete.  
Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say rejoice.*

That's why we light the rose-coloured candle this week. Our repentance for sin, the sin that made Christ's first coming so necessary; the spiritual cleansing of the temple of our souls that marked the start of our Advent journey, is lifted just a little this week as we move closer to Christmas Day; as we wait eagerly the coming of our Saviour in the flesh; as we look forward to our redemption drawing near.

But waiting is a difficult matter. Maybe for you; certainly for me; and maybe all the more so for John as he sits in prison. Waiting shapes so much of our lives: the elderly parent sitting in a nursing home, waiting and longing to be home; the parents sitting beside a hospital bed, waiting for a word with the doctor or results from the lab; waiting for the phone to ring; waiting for the letter to arrive; waiting for the apology that our heart needs to heal; maybe just waiting for this pandemic to be over.

We struggle with waiting not just because impatience is natural to our humanity but because waiting reminds us that we are not in control; that there are so many things we cannot direct; and when we are not in control we are reminded of our uncertainties and our insecurities. Maybe that's John's struggle in his prison cell. And maybe that's your struggle right now, in a prison cell of your making; or a cell made by someone in your life. Because this week's Gospel isn't just about Jesus' identity; or John's identity. It also speaks about who we are as the Body of Christ. As those made and remade in the image of Christ. As those called to grow more and more into the full image of Christ.

I don't know what you're waiting for. I don't know what you pray for when you're alone with your thoughts, surrounded by whatever walls of fear or doubt or anger that surround you. But I do know this. That God has promised that the wilderness will bloom. That the blind will be given sight. That the lame will walk. That the sick will be cleansed, and the dead will rise. That the poor, in all the numberless ways in which we can be impoverished, will hear Good News. And as the Church we have the joy of not just hearing that Good News but of being that Good News; of being Good News to those who cannot see or hear God's love but only through the love that we live.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Epistle for Advent 3: Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.