

**ST MARY'S CHURCH, HADLOW**  
**ADVENT 3: SUNDAY 11<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER 2016.**

**MATTHEW 11: 2-11**

**HOPES AND FEARS<sup>1</sup>**

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

*'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another'*<sup>2</sup> - John the Baptist's desperate plea is soul-searching and poignant – this is a far cry from the dynamic, wild-haired prophet who appeared from the desert wastes, calling for the children of Israel to repent, and baptising penitents in the waters of the River Jordan;<sup>3</sup> a far cry from the clarion call of the herald foretold by the prophet Isaiah - the voice crying out in the wilderness *'prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God;*<sup>4</sup> a far, far cry from the passionate preacher who castigated Pharisees and Sadducees alike, denouncing them as a *'brood of vipers.'*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *'The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight'* O Little Town of Bethlehem (carol)

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 11:3

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 3: 1-6 and Mark 1: 1-5. John the Baptist's sojourn in the desert has echoes of Elijah's life (John's clothing is also reminiscent of Elijah (2 Kings: 1-8). Matthew is making it crystal clear that John is the Elijah who was expected to return before the Messiah, but he, John, is not the Messiah. Cf Malachi 4: 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 40: 3. The quotation continues "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken". (vv 4-5)

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 3: 7. John's condemnation of the elite goes on to warn the religious leaders of the day that they cannot rely on their Jewish lineage for salvation; they needed not only to repent, but also to 'bear fruit worthy of repentance. (vv 7-11)

John's very public condemnation of King Herod<sup>6</sup> has proved a bridge too far: deprived of his liberty, John is now languishing in a dank, evil-smelling dungeon in the fortress of Machaerus<sup>7</sup>. I can't begin to imagine how dreadful this must have been for John. His entire adult life has been centred on the vast open spaces of the wilderness beyond the River Jordan. Now, shut away from sunlight in a filthy, underground cell, insidious treacherous doubts are beginning to eat away at him, threatening to suffocate his avowed belief in Jesus as the Messiah. Now, facing certain death at the hands of King Herod and Queen Herodias, he needs to know: *'Are you the one who is to come?'*<sup>8</sup>

Eight words – with a tangled web of possible interpretation: what prompted his question? Anger – impatience – disappointment – doubt – even despair? Standing on the banks of the River Jordan, he had been so sure: *'I baptise you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me ... He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.'*<sup>9</sup> Where was the

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<sup>6</sup> Herod Antipas had seduced his brother's wife, dismissed his own wife and married his sister-in-law.

<sup>7</sup> A fortified hilltop palace located in Jordan about 25 kilometres (16 miles) southeast of the mouth of the River Jordan on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. It was built in an important strategic position. Its high, rocky vantage point was difficult to access and any invasion from the east could easily be seen from the ramparts. It was rebuilt by Herod the Great in 30BC as a military base. On his death the fortress passed to his son, Herod Antipas who ruled from 4 BC up 39AD. It was during Herod Antipas' rule that John was imprisoned in the fortress.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 11: 3 [The words 'the One to come' had, for centuries, been used to refer to the Messiah. OT reference is made in Psalm 118:26, and additional NT references include Mark 11:9, Luke 13:35 and 19:38 and Hebrews 10:37]]

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 3: 11

fire? Where was God's vengeance? Where was the long-awaited uprising that would free the Children of Israel from Roman oppression?

Conversely, it can be argued that these eight words '*Are you the one who is to come*'<sup>10</sup> reveal the tentative re-awakening of faith. Could it be that imprisonment and isolation have given John time to reflect on all he has heard and seen in the months leading up to his arrest? Has the Holy Spirit (imparted to John before his birth, causing his heart to leap in his mother's womb<sup>11</sup>) strengthened his resolve? Think back - John had held Jesus in his arms, when '*the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove ... and a voice from heaven said "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,"*'<sup>12</sup> and we know, from St John the Evangelist's gospel, that the Baptist had not only cried out '*Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,*'<sup>13</sup> but had also declared publicly '*I have been sent ahead of Him ... my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.*'<sup>14</sup>

If this is so, if – in facing doubt and disappointment head on – John's faith in Jesus as the Messiah has been strengthened, John's '*Are you the one who is to*

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 11: 3

<sup>11</sup> John's birth had been foretold by the Angel Gabriel: Luke 1: 15-17 and Luke 1:44

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 3: 16-17

<sup>13</sup> John 1: 29

<sup>14</sup> John 3: 28,30

*come*<sup>15</sup> can also be seen as altruistic. John knows his days are numbered, his voice will be silenced, but his disciples<sup>16</sup> will live on. Will John's last plea pave the way for his faithful band of supporters to transfer their allegiance to Jesus? Is this why he's sending his disciples to Jesus with the burning question: *'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'*<sup>17</sup>

Faced with John's disciples, hearing John's anguished cry, and all too well aware that anything He says will also be heard by the crowd, Jesus sidesteps the question,<sup>18</sup> paraphrasing instead the words of the prophet Isaiah: *'Go and tell John what you see and hear: 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>19</sup> In other words, don't tell John what I'm saying, show him what's happening all around him: actions<sup>20</sup> speak louder than words. If we

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<sup>15</sup> Matthew 11: 3. The expression 'the one to come' referring to the Messiah can also be seen in Matthew 21:9, Mark 11:9, Luke 19:38, John 12:13 and Hebrews 10:37, based on Old Testament imagery (Psalm 118:26)

<sup>16</sup> The fact that John had a devoted band of disciples is also mentioned in Luke 7: 18-23 and John 1: 35 and 3:25

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 11: 3

<sup>18</sup> Had Jesus claimed to be the One to Come (the Messiah) He would have placed himself in danger of being arrested on a charge of blasphemy at too early a point in his ministry. In addition, it would not have been seen as acceptable, culturally, and at that time (first century Israel) for someone of lowly birth (as He was) to make any claims of grandeur.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 11: 4-6. Jesus is quoting directly from Isaiah: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer (35: 5-6); "Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise." (26:19); "The Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted.(61:1). Jesus includes in his reply a reference to the cleansing of lepers, although this does not appear in the Isaian prophecy. Furthermore, Jesus fails to include the freeing of captives – this does appear in the Isaian prophecy. It should also be noted that one of Jesus' references (Isaiah 35: 5) follows on directly from the words "Here is your God, he will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." (35:4) The first word of verse 35 "then" would appear to be predicated on the previous forth-telling of vengeance. In total contrast, Jesus is proclaiming blessing before vengeance.

<sup>20</sup> These acts of healing correspond with earlier summaries and narratives in St Matthew's gospel (4:24, 8:16 and 9:35) [ Ivor Jones: Epworth Commentaries : *The Gospel of Matthew*, page 71]

look back, for a moment, to St Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, we can see – with absolute clarity – that Jesus has already set out His beatitude blueprint, His '*merciful ministry to the marginalised*,'<sup>21</sup> and by framing His reply in this way – listing acts of healing in the third person – Jesus is tacitly including the healing performed, under His authority, by the disciples.<sup>22</sup>

He then goes on to say: '*And blessed is anyone who takes no offense*<sup>23</sup> *at me.*'<sup>24</sup> At first sight these words are puzzling, to say the least, but if we look at them upside down, as it were, we can see that Jesus is spelling it out: “blessed are those hear what I say and see what I do and still – in spite of everything - stand firm in their faith in me:” in effect, a beatitude and a warning.

John – as precursor, herald and prophet – had urged the crowds to look at Jesus and see the Messiah, sent by God to redeem Israel. Now Jesus is asking John to put aside all the preconceived ideas of Kingship he had once held dear, and, in humble faith, behold ‘the Lamb of God’. In effect, Jesus is telling John: '*Yes, I am the Messiah who was to come, but I have come, not as the fiery political*

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<sup>21</sup> John Pridmore *The Word is very near you: Sundays (Reflections on the lectionary)* [Canterbury Press 2009] page 14

<sup>22</sup> Ivor Jones: Epworth Commentaries: *The Gospel of Matthew*, page 71

<sup>23</sup> To take offence / be offended / to be a stumbling block or a snare (from the Greek: Skandalon). Cf John 6:61 “Does this offend you” and Matthew 16:23 “You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 11: 6

*reformer you expected and not as the military conqueror many of the Jewish people expected, but as one who heals and frees and resuscitates, who cares for the unfortunate and who preaches the good news to the poor. I have come as the fulfilment of the prophecies of the prophets.*<sup>25</sup>

We don't know how John reacts when he hears Jesus' answer, but there is one thing we can be sure of – raised in a priestly home and brought up in the strict Nazrite code<sup>26</sup> John knew his scriptures: and codified here, in Jesus' own words, are the six signs of the Messiah who was to come as laid down in the book of Isaiah. This, surely, is all he needs to know; there is no need, now, to “wait for another”. Now, with the Holy Spirit to guide and support him, John can not only withstand the privations of incarceration, but also face certain death safe in the knowledge that his mission is now complete. His life's work has not been in vain. Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. The time has come for John to step back and let Jesus take centre stage.

One of the most fascinating things about today's gospel reading is that Matthew writes John's disciples out of the picture before Jesus turns back to the crowd. His fulsome tribute to the Baptist is not for their ears. Now, in His turn, Jesus

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<sup>25</sup> Alexander J Burke jr *John the Baptist: Prophet and Disciple* [St Anthony Messenger Press 2006 p. 114

<sup>26</sup> Numbers 6: 10-21

asks a question of his own: “why did you seek John out – what did you expect to find in the wilderness” Allusions to a *‘reed shaken by the wind’*<sup>27</sup> and a man *‘dressed in soft robes’*<sup>28</sup> are not lost on those who gather round Him: long cane grass, swaying in the wind beside the River Jordan is a familiar sight (a shaken reed not only conjuring up an image of weakness and cowardice, but also, perhaps, an *‘uncomplimentary reference to King Herod’s .... use of a common reed on his coinage’*<sup>29</sup> ). As for “soft robes” – John is a far cry from the self-serving, obsequious, sycophantic courtiers who fawn over royalty. As God’s ambassador John has publicly denounced King Herod and his latter-day wife, Herodias: John is definitely no courtier.

*‘What then did you go out to see? A prophet?’*<sup>30</sup> *Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.*<sup>31</sup> With these words, and quoting Malachi: *‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you,’*<sup>32</sup> Jesus is publicly declaring that John the Baptist is, indeed, Elijah<sup>33</sup> reborn, the herald whose divine mission was to announce the coming of the Messiah.

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew 11:7

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 11:8

<sup>29</sup> Ivor H Jones (Epworth Commentaries) *The Gospel of Matthew* 1994 page 72

<sup>30</sup> Prophets are the forth-tellers of the truth of God: cf – Amos 3:7 “Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.”

<sup>31</sup> Matthew 11: 9

<sup>32</sup> Matthew 11: 10 Jesus words are based on Malachi 4:5 “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes” and Matthew 3:3 “This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said: ‘the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’.”

<sup>33</sup> The Jewish people have an affirmed belief: that before the Messiah comes, Elijah will return to herald his coming. Even today, at the Passover Feast, an empty chair is left for Elijah.

But although He praises John: *‘Truly I tell you ... no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist,*<sup>34</sup> he goes on, in the same sentence, to say: *‘yet the least of the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*<sup>35</sup> With these words Jesus is drawing a line in the sand: on one side of the boundary the Old Covenant – the Law and the Prophets; on the other side the New Covenant – the Kingdom of Heaven. John is seen, here, as *‘the beginning of the end of the old era and the end of the beginning of the new ...he is the boundary marker ... the mediator of (both) Old and New Covenants’.*<sup>36</sup>

We are now more than half way through our Advent journey, and although it seemed strange – at first – to be following St Matthew’s account of John the Baptist in the days leading up to Christmas, there are, I believe, valuable lessons we can take away with us this morning from today’s gospel reading. They may not be the most comfortable images to take on board at a time when there is still so much to do (to say nothing of tangled tree lights, sticky sellotape and over-excited toddlers) but I believe they need to be addressed:

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<sup>34</sup> Matthew 11: 11

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Alexander J Burke Jr *John the Baptist, Prophet and Disciple* [St Anthony Messenger Press, 1989] page 121. [See also Acts 1:22 which dates Christ’s ministry “ beginning from the baptism of John until the day when He was taken up from us.”

Are we, at times, disappointed in God – when fervent prayers are not answered, perhaps, or when our prayers are answered, but not in the way we want? Are we, at times, guilty of trying to shoehorn God to fit in with what we want? How many times have we felt like shouting: “It’s not fair!” “This isn’t the way I planned it!” Locked away in his prison cell John the Baptist must have felt just like that.

Are there times, even if we don’t want to admit it, when our faith in God is clouded by doubt and despair? If so we are not alone. Shut away from the sunlight John suffered doubt. Thomas, one of Jesus’ closest disciples, refused to accept the risen Christ until he had plunged his hand into our Saviour’s side. Doubt, if we’re honest, is part and parcel of our earthly Christian life, because now *‘we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known’*<sup>37</sup> [“a glass darkly” – such a wonderful image]. Centuries later, and we are not alone: St Teresa of Calcutta told the world that *‘my smile is a great cloak and hides a multitude of pains. People think that my faith, my hope and my love are overflowing and that my intimacy with God and union with his will fills my heart. If only they knew.’*<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12 (King James Version)

<sup>38</sup> St Teresa of Calcutta (1958) Quoted in *The World Is Very Near You (Sundays)* John Pridmore [Canterbury Press, Norwich 2009] page 13

Faced with disappointment, with doubt – even (at times) with despair – we need to remember what Jesus was inviting John (and by implication each and every one of us) to do: “behold the Lamb of God.” We have two more weeks (14 more hectic days!) on this, our Advent adventure. My prayer, this morning, is that we give ourselves a wonderful gift: the gift of time to reflect, in a moment or two’s quiet – away from the hustle and bustle – on the greatest mystery of all – how Almighty God came down to earth, taking on human flesh, and – as a man among men – brought the gift of eternal life to all mankind.

Amen.