

Scripture Study

Third Sunday of Advent – Cycle A



Opening prayer

Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10

(Ps 146:6-10)

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Overview of the Gospel:

- Last week we heard John the Baptist announce the coming of the Messiah. John is now imprisoned by King Herod for speaking out about his adulterous and incestuous marriage (Matthew 14:1-12). According to the Jewish historian Josephus, John was held at the palace-fortress of Machaerus, on the shore of the Dead Sea.
- From prison, John sends his discouraged disciples to ask Jesus point blank if he is the Messiah, the conquering king long awaited by the Jews. John himself had no doubts about Jesus' identity (Matthew 3:13-17; John 1:29), however he wanted his disciples to go directly to Jesus, to find out why they should believe he was the Messiah, and begin to follow him, not John, who was about to be executed.
- Jesus replies by showing how he has fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah (verse 5; Isaiah 26:19, 29:18-19, 35:5-6, 61:1; Matthew 8:1-7).
- Jesus also testifies to the great dignity of John the Baptist. He was the long awaited prophet (Malachi 3:1; Matthew 11:13-14) whose privilege it was to announce the Messiah, greater than any prophet who had come before (Matthew 13:17; 1 Peter 1:10-12). As great as he was, however, Jesus says there is someone greater (verse 11)!

Questions:

- The 1st Reading from the prophet Isaiah describes a time of renewal, rest and refreshment in the age of the Messiah. How has Christ at least begun to fulfill these promises since his coming? In your life and the life of believers today? In a completed way at the end of time?
- In the 2nd Reading, for what event is St. James urging his readers to patiently await? For what reason are they to exercise this patience? What OT examples can you think of (verse 10)?
- In the Gospel Reading, who questions Jesus (verse 2)? How did John wind up in prison (Matthew 14:1-5)?
- Why did John send the questions that he did? Does Jesus answer John's questions more with promises or with evidence? Why? How might John, who knew the Old Testament well, have interpreted Jesus' reply (see Isaiah 35:5-6; 61:1)?
- How was John *unlike* a weak reed or a well-groomed politician? What does Jesus say about John (verses 9-11)? Why was he greater than the Old Testament prophets? How is a New Testament believer greater than John the Baptist (verse 11; see Matthew 18:3-4)?
- What kind of "prisons" tend to bring out doubts for you regarding Jesus? In those periods of discouragement and doubt, what most renews your courage and faith?
- In what specific way can you be an encourager to someone in Church ministry? In your family? Among your friends?

Catechism of the Catholic Church: §§ 523, 549, 719, 2443, 548

Closing Prayer

Remember to read and meditate on the daily Mass readings found in the bulletin!

It is better to be the child of God than king of the whole world. -St. Aloysius Gonzaga

"The one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist!"

Scripture: Matthew 11:2-11

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses. Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold I send my messenger before your face, who shall prepare your way before you.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Meditation: Who is the greatest in the kingdom of God? Jesus praised John the Baptist as the greatest person born. Who can top that as a compliment? But in the same breath Jesus says that the least in the kingdom of God is even greater than John! That sounds like a contradiction, right? Unless you understand that what Jesus was about to accomplish for



our sake would supersede all that the prophets had done and foreseen in the past. John is the last and greatest of the prophets of the old covenant. He fulfilled the essential task of all the prophets – to be fingers pointing to Christ, God's Anointed Son and Messiah. John prepared the way for the Messiah and he pointed others to Jesus the Messiah at the River Jordan when he exclaimed, *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world* (John 1:29) John saw from a distant what Jesus would accomplish through his death on the cross – our redemption from bondage to sin and death and our adoption as sons and daughters of God and citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

Why did John, while in prison, send his disciples to question Jesus? John wanted them to hear and see firsthand from the Messiah himself before John would meet his fate, martyrdom at the hands of King Herod. Jesus says that his miracles and message about the kingdom or reign of God are proof enough for John and his disciples to recognize as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy foretelling the signs and wonders which the Messiah would perform (see

Isaiah 35). Jesus in his characteristic fashion also returned one question with another. What do you see in John the Baptist? And why does Jesus contrast John with a reed? Unlike a reed which is spineless and can be bruised easily, John stands as a pillar of truth which no demonic force can overtake because his heart is set on God and burns with the fire of God's truth and love. Someone who is tepid – careless, half-hearted, and lukewarm – is easily swayed by whatever hits his or her fancy. If our heart is not filled with the love of God it easily grows cold and our faith wanes. If the heart feels emptied of God it seeks to fill the void with other things, which not being God, cannot bring true satisfaction. If we want to be like John the Baptist, then we must set our heart, mind, soul, and strength on one thing, and one thing only – the Lord Jesus Jesus Christ and his kingdom of everlasting peace, joy, and righteousness. There is no room for compromise. We are either for Jesus and his kingdom or against it. We either give him our full allegiance and submission or we hold on to the reigns of running life as we want it to go.

"Lord Jesus, stir my zeal for your righteousness and for your kingdom. Free me from complacency and from compromising with the ways of sin and worldliness that I may be wholeheartedly devoted to you and to your kingdom."

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