

## **Advent 3 Year A**

**16/12/07 Mary Mags**

### **Matthew 11:2-11**

**“Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” Matthew 11:3**

“Patience” is a virtue, at least according to the list of the seven virtues which the middle ages took from Prudentius. Patience also features highly in the New Testament as something to which Christians ought to aspire. The early church lived in the expectation of the coming of Christ. As time went on, and Christ had not come, this sowed seeds of doubt in the minds of some, and we see in both the gospels and the epistles the importance of waiting until the opportune time, a theme which we stress during Advent. It would be wrong, however, to see Advent as principally concerned with waiting. Watching, staying awake, is more important. We will need to wait, but that waiting has to be done expectantly, we must be alert, and not sleep through the master’s arrival.

Waiting as end in itself seems impossible. By definition, there must be something for which we are waiting. The process of waiting and the exercise of patience allows us to learn a great deal, but our focus

will always be on the climax, the arrival, the end, rather than the period beforehand.

John the Baptist was waiting. He knew that he didn’t have long to wait, but nevertheless he was waiting for something to happen, waiting for the judgement of God and issuing his warnings whilst he waited. In this morning’s gospel, we find him close to the end of his life, imprisoned by Herod Antipas, sending two of his disciples to Jesus to ask an all important question: are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?

Some have found John’s question odd. After all, right at the beginning of the gospel, has he not identified Jesus as the one he prophesied, the one whose sandals he isn’t worthy to carry, the one who should be doing the baptizing, not being baptized? Well, yes he has, but he predicted that the one who came after him would be a judge to burn with fire. Matthew introduces this passage with the words, “When John heard in prison of the deeds of Christ”. It is almost as if the words and the deeds of Jesus do not match that for which John has been waiting: his expectations are thrown slightly off beam by man from Nazareth; he sends his messengers to make sure.

Jesus answers his question with a series of allusions to the prophet Isaiah. The sights and sounds which John’s disciples carry back with

them are the stuff of the redemption of Israel which we heard in our first reading - Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy. Jesus words to the two enquirers could not be more forthright: 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.” We can hear an echo of the modern tendency to answer a seemingly obvious question by saying simply “What do you think”?

The passages to which Jesus alludes in his answer generally contain concomitant woes to accompany their blessings – the deaf, the blind, the meek and the poor shall be lifted up, but the ruthless and the wicked shall be brought to nothing. We hear nothing of these woes in the signs of the kingdom which Jesus lists. He has been deliberately selective in his answer: the judgement of God, which John emphasized in such lurid fashion, is indeed present, but it is a judgement which redeems through the presence of God with us, in the words and the deeds of Jesus himself.

It is too strong, perhaps, to see Jesus’ answer as a corrective to John’s question. But it reminds us that waiting, important as it is, must come to an end. Procrastination is one of the fashionable sins of

our time, and by that I do not mean a dilatory hanging around when we ought to be writing our Christmas cards or re-tiling our bathrooms. I mean the dangerous security we seem to find in delaying important things for fear that action might take us out of our comfort zone. It is one thing to recognize a problem for what it is, and it is another thing genuinely to want to find its solution, because once a solution is presented to us we will be challenged to put that solution into action. There is a natural timidity in our lives which is challenged by this season of Advent and by the preaching of Jesus himself, who did not stop and converse with the Galilean fishermen, but simply called them to follow as he continued to walk past.

The danger of devoting a great deal of time and attention to waiting is that, during that waiting period, we create for ourselves so precise and so secure a picture of what is going to happen that when the climax arrives we do not recognize it, for it does not fit into our neat and carefully prepared template of what it is we are waiting for. Waiting becomes a kind of self-indulgence which lends more and more importance to our own individual decision or action, building ourselves up all of the time precisely by not doing anything, when the imperative to act is clear if we would only look up and see what it is that God is doing around us. Jesus, remember, does not answer John’s question: he simply tells the disciples to look around, and to

report what they see. God is at work – it is our job to respond. Jesus does not tick the boxes of an expected Jewish messiah, rather he lives out the anointing presence of God in word and in action, and transformed the lives of those around him as he enacted that presence. Waiting must come to an end, and we must have the courage to rise and to follow when it does.

The Cumbrian poet Norman Nicholson put it like this:

Better wait  
Till you start school.  
You're too small yet.  
The other boys are all bigger than you.  
They're too rough for you.  
You'll only hurt yourself,  
Better wait  
Till you start school.

Better wait  
Till you go to the Seniors.  
You're still too young to be safe on a bike.  
There's so much traffic.  
The roads are a death-trap.  
And make sure first of your eleven-plus.  
Better wait  
Till you go to the Seniors.

Better wait  
Till you leave school.  
You need your sleep.  
And you've got your homework.  
And what do you want with girls at your age.  
There'll be plenty of chance for all that later.  
Better wait  
Till you leave school.

Better wait  
Till you're married.  
Don't rush it.  
You've all your life before you.

And once you've made your mind up  
You'll have to lie on it.  
Better wait  
Till you're married.

Better wait  
Till the kids grow up.  
There's more than you to think of now.  
You've got responsibilities.  
You've got ties.  
Somebody has to do the donkey-work.  
Somebody has to sacrifice something.  
Better wait  
Till the kids grow up.

Better wait  
Till you've retired.  
You can't afford to ease off the pressure.  
Keep your eye on that pension.  
Keep your hand off those brochures.  
There's always next year for this year's holiday.  
Better wait  
Till you've retired.

Better wait  
A bit longer.  
Try to keep active.  
Try to keep cheerful.  
Don't give in to the old Anno Domini.  
It's not time yet to start putting your feet up.  
Better wait  
Till you're dead.

The apostle Paul has it rather differently. “Now is the acceptable time: now is the day of salvation.”