

**Is 35.1-10; Ps 146. 5-10; James 5. 7-10; Matt 11.2-11.**

**Jervis**

John, the famous and provocative prophet is in prison. John, the dramatic celebratory who has his own disciples and has tapped into a deep well of longing and discontent in his fellow country people – John is in prison.

John, the one who understood himself to be God’s preparer for the deliverance of Israel from the Romans; and from Israel’s own lack of obedience to God; the one who felt sure enough of his role for God to speak in the words of Isaiah the great prophet from Israel’s time of exile in Babylon. Who presented himself to the people in Isaiah’s words: “the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” John, who enacted and embodied one of Israel’s key voices of hope for deliverance and of trust in God – John is in prison.

John, who drew the discontented to himself in the wilderness and had them go into the muddy Jordan river as a way of dramatizing being cleansed of their sins; as a way of participating in preparing for deliverance – John is now in prison.

He is staring at the walls, wondering what is going on. He knows he almost certainly won’t get out alive.

He has no friends in high places. He has called the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers. And he has challenged Herod Antipas’ marriage to his living brother’s wife.

Has his life of devotion to God – a rigorous life, fostered by his father Zechariah and his mother Elizabeth – no wine or strong drink, celibate, an ascetic life focused on God and God’s love for Israel. Has it been in vain?

He was certain that he would see the Messiah’s arrival. He was certain he was the one who was preparing for the deliverer. And he thought he had identified the Christos, the Messiah. When he was at the Jordan baptizing, a man named Jesus came from Galilee and wanted also to be baptized. John had recognized something special about this Jesus.

Initially he had not let Jesus join the throngs of people. “I need to be baptized by you”, he had said. But Jesus convinced him; and so he had baptized this unique person. And, he couldn’t have been wrong to do so. As Jesus came up out of the water, the heaven opened and the Spirit of God came on Jesus in the form of a dove. And John had heard God saying ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”

John knew then that he had been right to predict that his role was to baptize with water so that people could repent; he felt confirmed that indeed he was the one who prepared the way for what he could best describe as “the one who comes after me”. John knew that that coming one would be stronger than he – so much greater that he would not be worthy even for the servant’s task of carrying this strong one’s sandals.

John had a vision for what this great person from God would do. He would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John envisioned the one who came after him would holding a huge farm tool; just like the farmers used to clean the threshing floor and throw out the chaff. This larger than life deliverer – John was sure - would clean the chaff from Israel - particularly the Romans and the Jewish elites who collaborated with them. This Messiah would throw all that garbage into a fire that would never go out.

The Romans would be punished; Israel would be purified. God’s vengeance would finally be demonstrated against all that challenges God’s righteousness and God’s special purposes for God’s people.

John’s own father had sung about this – how God would raise up a mighty savior and save Israel from her enemies and all who hate her; and then Israel would be able to serve God without fear. God was about to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

But now – where was he sitting? Bound in a dark prison, expecting that Herod was going to execute him.

And so, feeling tempted to despair that all his obedience and rigour, all his effort to discern God's ways, had been in vain – John asks his disciples to go to Jesus.

He has heard how much of a stir Jesus has been making – Jesus has his own disciples; Jesus is known to be a provocative communicator; and he has done some wonderful healings.

Jesus has not exactly baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire; and he has not yet proven himself to be a mighty deliverer – but, maybe John just hasn't waited long enough. But he feels that time is running out.

So, sitting in darkness and the shadow of death, John reaches out with cautious openness. He sends his disciples to ask Jesus – 'are you the one who is to come, or should we be waiting for someone else?'

Jesus answers with words from the same great prophet that John had used to describe himself. Jesus uses the song Isaiah sang about how wonderful it was going to be for the JEws to be liberated. John and Jesus speak to each other in Isaiah's voice.

The part of Isaiah's song that Jesus uses – 'the blind receive their sight; the lame walk' – these words from Isaiah are preceded by the lines: "say to those who are of a fearful heart, Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, it is God's retribution; he comes to save you."

Jesus expects John to hear the code language. Jesus picks up the song at this point and says to John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 'the blind receive their sight, the lame walk'; and then Jesus adds to Isaiah's words – tell John also that the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised and the poor have good news preached to them.

And as John's disciples turn to leave, Jesus says, 'blessed is anyone who is not scandalized at me.'

An odd way for Jesus to end his response to John's disciples; and a strange sort of beatitude.

I think it gives a window onto Jesus' vulnerability. We might hear in Jesus' words a recognition that he expects that John will be disappointed and confused by the response his disciples bring him. He cannot say to John that he is a mighty deliverer baptizing with fire; he is not a terrifying judge with an oversized winnowing fork; he is not throwing chaff into an unquenchable fire.

Blessed is anyone who is not scandalized at me. Jesus admits that he knows that he scandalizes John's expectations. He had joined the broken and needy people of Israel in getting baptized by John in the muddy Jordan. And as with other poor and politically inconsequential families, he was born in a stable, among the chaff.

And yet Jesus also implicitly claims the words of Isaiah for himself: 'here is your God'. Jesus knows that - evidence to the contrary - he is the presence of God; and his work of healing and of preaching good news to the poor is the way God comes in judgement; and the way God saves.

"Blessed is anyone who is not scandalized at me". These words are both Jesus' recognition that he does not look like the deliverer John expects and that he knows himself to be God's deliverer – the one who has come to judge and to save.

After Jesus' words, John's disciples simply go away. Matthew does not tell us how John reacted – whether or not he was comforted in his final days by the report his disciples brought him. It is clear that John's disciples do not join Jesus' group. This may say something about how John reacted.

As Matthew tells it, both John and Jesus are at once both deeply faithful; and perplexed. They each believe that God wants to save and they believe that that includes God judging –

separating evil from good and destroying what is evil. Yet, the way God is saving and judging looks so relatively inconsequential; so relatively quiet – even ineffective.

So some blind people receive their sight; so some deaf people hear; so some of the poor have good news preached to them. Even if some dead people are raised – the brutal all-encompassing presence of the Romans continues; the Jewish elites continue to be complicit with their oppressors; and there are few in Israel who are truly obedient to God. And, there are always more deaf, more blind, more lame, more dead, more poor.

Is this the presence of God? Is this God's judgement and salvation?

We don't know what conclusion John came to. We do know that Jesus laid down his life for his faith that, yes, this is what God's judgement on evil looks like; that this is what God's salvation looks like.

Week by week in Advent here at Redeemer and at many, many other churches around the world we light candles. WE do this to dramatize our faith that God is present in our dark world; to illustrate our trust that God is here. That God came in the baby born in the chaff of the stable. We light candles to say that we trust that God will not let evil rule God's world; that God will not let the darkness win.

We light candles to say that we are disciples of Jesus the Messiah whose deliverance and judgement was seen/is seen in acts of healing and of giving good news to the poor. And we light candles to dramatize our hope that the glory of this way of deliverance will some day fill the whole earth; to make visible our hope that there will be another Advent.

One of the great wisdoms of the practice of Advent is that it asks us to keep the eyes of our hearts on the first coming of Jesus Messiah at the same time as longing and praying for the second.

This practice is critical because unless we recognize the character of the first Advent, we won't be able to recognize the second when it comes.

The first Advent was not what John expected; and it was not what most of us would expect – deliverance in the form of a caring for the sick, the weak, the poor; deliverance by a Messiah who was rejected by most of his own people and executed by the Romans oppressors.

I have had the joy and privilege of being part of Church of the Redeemer for many years now. If I were asked for one descriptor of the life of this community it might be that we focus on recognizing and enacting Jesus' first coming in hopes of preparing for his second.

We try to do what Jesus did; be where Jesus was; be with the people Jesus cared for and healed. And in our best moments we do this with the kind of humility and faith and perseverance that we see in Jesus; and in our even better moments we do this with the help of the Holy Spirit – with the help of the Spirit that the risen Jesus has breathed into our individual and communal lives.

With help of the Spirit of Christ we serve God and our neighbor; we give our lives out of love and in the deep faith that God's glory is revealed in the form of a poor refugee baby; in the man from Galilee who healed and whose life of love defeated the power of sin and the power of death. We serve God and our neighbor in the deep hope that this glory – this kind of glory - is going to fill the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Far be it from me to speak on behalf of Jesus Messiah, but I think he might say to our community of faithful disciples – blessed are you that you are not scandalized at me.