

St. Matthew's Church

101212 True Greatness
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Scripture Readings:
Isaiah 35:1-10
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

TRUE GREATNESS

Matthew 11:2-11

Third Sunday of Advent, December 12, 2010

The career of John the Baptist had ended in disaster. It was not John's habit to soften the truth for any man; and he was incapable of seeing evil without rebuking it. He had spoken too fearlessly and too definitely for his own safety. John had the fortitude to live a hard life as an example, then finally to give up his life rather than back down from his beliefs.

Herod Antipas of Galilee had paid a visit to his brother in Rome. During that visit he seduced his brother's wife. He came home again, dismissed his own wife, and married the sister-in-law whom he had lured away from her husband. Publicly and sternly John rebuked Herod. Herod took his revenge and had John thrown into the dungeon of a fortress in the mountains near the Dead Sea.

In today's Gospel we meet the disciples of John the Baptist. They have just visited him in prison, and he has directed them to go to Jesus and inquire as to who he, Jesus, is. "Are you the one?" He had been so sure that Jesus was the One who was to come. You can easily imagine the frustration of John's disciples. They had been with John while he was proclaiming that the messiah was coming. They had been with John as he was baptizing and preaching about repentance and preparation. Also, perhaps they had seen many fakes and charlatans declare themselves the messiah. That was one of the commonest titles of the messiah for whom the Jews waited with such eager expectation. (Mark 11:9; Luke 13:35; Hebrews 1:37; Psalm 118:26).

So John directed his disciples to go and asks Jesus if He was he Messiah. A dying man cannot afford to have doubts; he must be sure, and so his disciples came to Jesus with the question: "Are you He who is to come, or shall we look for another?" The supreme argument for Christ is not intellectual debate, but the experience of His changing power.

A brighter faith and hope impart,
And let me now my Savior see;
Oh! Soothe and cheer my saddened heart,
And bid my spirit rest in thee.

“Are you the one?” Implied in the question is not simply a satisfaction of human curiosity. Matthew draws us into the Old Testament’s promises and prophecies the messiah would come. Neither is the question simply rhetorical. The question is sincere and based on the profound concern of one who is searching for truth, one who is looking for a way to make sense of the nonsense in the world. Imprisoned, John is still looking for the reason for his mission and ministry. We take notice that John does not direct his disciples to ask Jesus why he, John, is imprisoned. They are simply to ask; “Are you the one?” It just might be that this is not the question of a despairing and an impatient man, but the question of one whose eyes the light of hope shone, and who asked for nothing but confirmation of that hope.

Ho, my comrades! See the signal/Waving in the sky!
Reinforcements now appearing,/Victory is nigh./ Hold
The Fort, for I am coming,”/Jesus signals still;/ Wave the
Answer back to heaven,/ “By thy grace we will.”

Then came Jesus’ answer, and in His answer we hear the accent of confidence. Jesus answer to John’s disciples was: “Go back, and don’t tell John what I am saying; tell him what I am doing. Don’t tell John what I am claiming; tell him what is happening.” Jesus indicated that John would find his answer precisely where he found his question, in the deeds of the Christ. Jesus cited His works: (1.) Sight for the blind. (2.) Strength for the lame. (3.) Cleansing for lepers. (4.) Hearing for the deaf. (5.) Life for the dead. (6.) The Gospel for the poor. Jesus does not say; “Listen to what I have to tell you; nor does say, “Look what I can do for you; see what I have done for others.” The things that Jesus did in Galilee He still does. In Him the poorest man inherits the riches of the love of God.

Jesus’ answer to John in verses 5 and 6 is not presented as a specific quotation from the Old Testament, they best known text is Isaiah 61:1-2, because it is the passage Jesus took as the basis for his first sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth:

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
Because the Lord has anointed me
To preach good news to the poor.
He sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim freedom for the captives
And release from darkness for the prisoners,
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Finally comes the warning: “And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.” So Jesus says to John, “Maybe I am not doing the things you expected me to do. But the powers of evil are being defeated not by irresistible power, but by unanswerable love.” Sometimes a man can be offended at Jesus because Jesus cuts across his ideas of what religion should be. “Those who criticize the most are the ones who create nothing.”

There are few men to whom Jesus paid so tremendous a tribute as He did to John the Baptizer. He begins by asking the people what they went into the desert to see; “a reed shaken by the wind?” When the people flocked to see John, were they going out to see something as ordinary as the reeds swaying in the wind on the Jordan’s banks? Did they expect to find someone who was so fickle that he might be swayed by any new personality and ideology that came along? Did they expect to find someone who was dressed in the finest of clothes? If the people were coming to see John in order to see how a prophet dressed and to hear what his most recent prophecy was, then they were sorely disappointed. If, on the other hand, they came to see John in order to determine what a contemporary first-century prophet was all about and to be challenged to repent, to be saved, and to be baptized, then they came to the right place; the desert of Judea, where John practiced his ministry. John was neither as ordinary as a shaken reed, nor as spineless as the reed, which sways with every breeze.

Did they go out to see a prophet? The prophet is the *forth-teller* of the truth of God. The prophet is the man in the confidence of God. “Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). Prophets are not slick people who use PR tactics in order to impress the crowds; on the contrary, they are people of God, and their missions and ministries are a life-style. The prophet is the man with God’s wisdom in his mind, God’s truth on his lips, and God’s courage in his heart. This most certainly is a characterization of John and Jesus tells the people

that “among those born of woman no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.”

John was something more than a prophet. The Jews believed that before the Messiah came, Elijah would return to herald his coming. To this day, when the Jews celebrate the Passover Feast, a vacant chair is left for Elijah. “Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes” (Malachi 4:5). Jesus declared that John was nothing less than the divine herald whose duty and privilege it was to announce the coming of the Messiah and no man could have a greater task than that. Such was the tremendous tribute of Jesus to John, spoken with the accent of admiration. There has never been a greater figure in all history than John the Baptist.

As we gather for worship or meetings or celebrations in our local congregations and catch a glimpse, literally or in our mind’s eye, of the tiny figure in the manger, we might ask, with the people of the first century, “Are you the one? Can you possibly be the one? How can you, a powerless baby, be the one?”

Or perhaps it’s a glimpse of the empty cross on a chain around someone’s neck or on the top of a building or in a chapel: “You died before you changed the world, and it’s worse now, over two thousand years later, than when you were alive. How can you be the one?”

Maybe we are so overwhelmed with bad news in our lives that our faith is in crisis. We are looking to make some sense out of non-sense, some meaning out of meaninglessness. “Are you the one?”

Our Christian community helps us to hear God’s answer: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are given good news. Our Christian community strengthens us when we feel weak. Our Christian community commissions us to go on when the going is extremely rough. Our Christian community helps to under-gird our conviction when our faith wavers. Our Christian community reminds us that we are one with Christ when we feel abandoned and alone. Our Christian community renews us when we are hungry and thirsty. Our Christian community puts us in touch with Jesus, where we are reminded that all we do and all we are about is in the love and grace of Christ.

We are called to be present-day prophets who are not swayed by every new religious idea that arises in our society nor by those who dress dazzlingly to impress the peoples. We are to be faithful to God's message of salvation and grace as we prepare the way for Jesus. The way may be difficult and lonely. But we must remember that God is always with us in our mission and ministry. The Holy Spirit will not allow us to falter in our work of spreading the good news. As we prepare to celebrate the arrival of the Christ child, let us remember that God has not abandoned us. We can say with certainty. **You are the one!**