

The Big Question

William Cwirla

Matthew 11:2–15

Last week, the wilderness. This week, Herod's prison. How quickly things have changed. Last week we heard John preaching a baptism of repentance, calling Israel back to her wilderness roots. Today we hear the question from the depths of the dungeon: Are you the one who is to come, or do we look for another one?

This is the reading for this 3rd Sunday in Advent, the Sunday traditionally called Gaudete, the Sunday of rejoicing, the "pink candle Sunday" for those of you with a pink candle in your Advent wreath. It's supposed to be a Sunday of joy amidst the gloominess of December. Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say: Rejoice. Why? The Lord is near. Those words came from the apostle Paul writing to the Philippians from prison. There is joy even for the one in prison.

John was imprisoned for criticizing Herod's personal life, his taking up with the estranged wife of his brother Philip. For that, the greatest born of women, the last of the prophets who came in the spirit and power of Elijah was thrown into prison and eventually died there. Certainly God doesn't run the show the way we would! There are no displays of divine power, no judicial intercessions, no storming of the gates by the hosts of heaven, much less a horde of armed disciples or even a group of lawyers clamoring for his civil rights. For more than a year, John, the great preacher, the last of the prophets, sits idly in prison and Jesus goes about teaching, preaching, and healing.

And finally, there comes the question: Are you the One, Jesus? Or do we look for another?

Was John asking for himself or on behalf of others? Some people think that John sent his disciples to Jesus with the question not for himself but for them, to reassure them that Jesus really was the One, the Messiah, the coming One they had been waiting for. John wanted his followers to hear it directly from Jesus Himself and not become disheartened by John's imprisonment.

Others think that John had a moment of doubt while in prison. The Jesus who came was not quite the Jesus whom John had prepared for. John had faithfully, unflinchingly preached Jesus as the One coming with a winnowing fork of judgment in His hand, ready to sort the faithful wheat from the unbelieving chaff. The axe of His wrath was already laid to the dead root of Israel. Unfruitful branches were going to be cut down and burned with eternal fire. John baptized with water, but the coming One would baptize with fire and wind. Yet when Jesus came, He came humbly and gently, baptized by John in solidarity with sinners, healing various diseases, liberating people from their demons, proclaiming the kingdom not in power but in meekness.

I'm not sure which way to think. In the past, I've always thought that it was John who doubted. And yet there is something compelling about the notion of John sending his disciples to Jesus for their instruction and benefit. John must decrease, Jesus must increase. Loyalists to John needed to know that this humble, gentle Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Christ of God come to save. Jesus was the One to follow, not John. John was a voice in the wilderness, a sign post, a way shower; Jesus is the Way, the Savior, the Christ.

Either way, whether for John or for his disciples, the thought is the same: the way of the kingdom of God is the way of the cross, the way of suffering, the way of dying and rising, the hidden way of weakness instead over strength. The foremost prophet winds up in a dungeon and loses his head for criticizing the king's morals; the coming One gets crucified for bringing the kingdom of God. It's not our way of doing things, is it?

Our way is the way of power. Even our notion of peace on earth is a peace maintain by power with the assurance of destruction. We respect power and the powerful. The world, as we know it, is run by the Herods and the Pontius Pilates. Men of power. Men who can put you in prison and can take off your head or crucify you. We respect power, we fear it, we covet it for ourselves, especially the power to control. If only we could just get everyone to do things our way, the kingdom of God would appear in our midst.

John came in power, a man of conviction not shaken by every little change in the wind. A man of the wilderness unconcerned with creature comforts of what he would eat or what he would wear. A prophet who himself was prophesied by the prophet Malachi, coming in the spirit and power of Elijah. Jesus called him the greatest born of women. The greatest. No one born in this world was greater than John the Baptizer. And yet, in the words of Jesus, even the least in

the kingdom, the tiniest baptized baby, the lowliest believer, is greater than John. This is not a kingdom of power or of the law.

The kingdom suffers violence. It's vulnerable in this world. It's like seed sown in soil that can be trampled, choked, scorched, or even gobbled up by the birds. The greatest prophet can be arrested, imprisoned, and even beheaded. The God's chosen anointed One can be arrested, beaten, and crucified. His believers are persecuted, ridiculed, martyred. The Church is always a mess – disorganized and divided, a far cry from the slick corporations and powerful kingdoms of this world. To the eyes of the old Adam and of this world, Christianity appears to be nothing more than a bunch of superstitious losers following the biggest loser there ever was.

We too might succumb to doubt and despair ourselves as we look around at the state of things. We too might think it quietly, in the secret of our own thoughts when prayers seem to fail or when we've become bored with worship or get frustrated with the realities of living as sinner-saints with our fellow sinner-saints. We might be tempted to ask in the midst of our own personal struggle, "Do we have the right One or is there a "One" at all? Is Jesus is the One or do we look for another? Are we wasting our time with this religion, with any religion, with religion in general?"

Jesus gave John's disciples the messianic signs to hang faith's hat on: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor are evangelized. They knew those signs from the prophet Isaiah, signs of the coming kingdom when the wilderness would burst into gladness and the desert would rejoice and God would come to save them. Jesus' miracles served as signs that the age of Messiah had come with His coming, that the time of gladness and joy was dawning even in the midst of sadness.

You have even greater signs: Jesus' own death and resurrection. Christ has died; Christ has risen. You have your Baptism, a personal sign from God that the kingdom has come to you and that you are part of this kingdom that comes with a hidden strength. You have the word of the kingdom's forgiveness, spoken with the King's authority, in His stead and by His command, that your sins are covered and paid for, that the King Himself has covered your debt and you are free to live in peace. And you have the surest token of His blessing – His own Body and Blood – the fruits of His sacrifice, given and shed for you. Blessed is the one who is not scandalized by this Jesus whose power to save is hidden in weakness.

The apostle Paul wrote: “We have this treasure – that is, the treasure of the Gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection that justifies the sinner and gives life to the dead – we have this treasure in jars of clay. Humble, ordinary clay pots which are nothing much to look at it. Not gallery pieces of pottery, just homely everyday cookware. We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

Rarely will you find anyone who boasts in his failings or weaknesses. We usually boast in our successes and accomplishments. Paul even boasted in his unanswered prayers. He prayed three times that God would relieve him of some unnamed thorn in the flesh, some antagonist who undermined his ministry and made his life miserable. “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that he would depart from me.” And three times Paul heard this answer from God: “No, no, no. My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.” Paul concludes: “Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

This is the hidden strength of Christ, and the hidden joy of Advent. You may not have the “joy, joy, joy” down in your heart on this Sunday called Gaudete. You may feel weak and powerless against the powers and principalities of this world. Your life may be more of a dark dungeon and the Herods of this world may appear to hold the upper hand. But the strength of Christ is hidden in the weakness of the Virgin, the manger, the cross, the water, the Word, the bread and wine. The power of God for salvation is hidden in the weakness of a Gospel the world does not wish to hear. The joy of the kingdom is hidden in the sorrows of this life just as the joys of Christmas remain buried in a dark little season called Advent.

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.

Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not!”

Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God.

He will come and save you.

Come, Lord Jesus!

Amen.

SOURCE

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