

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's fortuitous that our Gospel lesson for today concerns John the Baptist, because we are going to witness and participate in an actual holy baptism this morning after my homily. Our previous lesson on Advent II provided a description of John and some information about his role in the ministry of Jesus. Today's passage brings the story forward to its conclusion with his later contact with Jesus and his imprisonment and execution.

But it also serves a larger purpose. This section of Matthew's gospel is concerned with the problem of *faith and unbelief*. In other words, it focuses on *who Jesus actually is*. It concerns his identity. John helps us see Jesus as the Messiah.

When John asks of Jesus, "are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Matthew's overall account would not lead us to conclude that John is doubting the role of Jesus as Messiah. More likely, this is "Matthew's way of presenting evidence for Jesus' identity." This is because in his account, the reader or listener has already seen Jesus perform the deeds of healing which now serve as that evidence. This being the case, there is no loss of faith on John's part, nor is there any confusion in his mind. So, the question asked is "necessary simply to introduce the evidence." Jesus follows up his reply with a long speech to the crowds about John that "explicitly identifies John and the Elijah who is to come before God's messiah." Looking ahead, the reader or listener begins here to see that "the violence suffered by the kingdom will soon claim both the Baptist and Jesus."

The true identity of Jesus is confirmed here in the following descriptors: "Jesus is the Christ who has come after Elijah; he is the Son of man, the servant of the Lord, the Son of David, the one on whom the Spirit of God rests, whose miracles are signs of the coming kingdom," all of which are found throughout the 11th and 12th chapters of Matthew. They are important because they represent a turning-point in the gospel: "the kingdom has been announced to Israel by John the Baptist, and by the words and deeds of Jesus and of his apostles, but Israel rejects it...because of unbelief." But this results in opening up the way for salvation to be preached to the Gentiles, the essential element in the rise of the early church. And a passage from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah demonstrates this when it says "he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles...in his name will the Gentiles hope."

John's arrest had been mentioned in chapter 4, but nothing further seemed to have come of it until we reach chapter 11, but in the meantime, Jesus has engaged in the deeds which will demonstrate who he is. This occurs primarily in chapters 8 and 9. Here he is in prison and wants to give his approval for the claim that Jesus is the Messiah. It may be that it was only when he was imprisoned that he began to believe in Jesus as the Christ, but this is speculation. We can, however, be pretty certain that Matthew is telling us something about Jesus, not John. About the works of Jesus and the possibility of either faith or rejection resulting from witnessing the ministry of Jesus. Thus, the idea here is to focus on belief and unbelief, faith and the lack of it.

Jesus does not say directly that he is authoritatively "the Christ," but he invites John to consider what his messengers can actually see and hear. Who is this man who is now in Herod's prison? He is a prophet, and yet even more than a prophet ---- he is *the (special) one sent to prepare the way* for the Messiah. But Matthew makes clear that John bears witness for one who is greater than anyone in this age, the Messiah himself. And, as I mentioned last week, the purpose of this is to demonstrate that Jesus is superior to John, the greater of the two, the fulfillment of prophecy itself. This was important, because in the days of the early church, there were many followers of John who continued to be his disciples long after his death which threatened the survival of the entire Jesus movement; the writer of the gospel must make clear that Jesus is the greater of the two, Jesus is *the fulfillment*, not the witness and prophet who foretells the arrival of the Messiah.

Another reason for focusing here on the true identity of Jesus is that his "words and deeds are offensive to some people." He did not fit the widely held expectation of the kind of Messiah who would come to save Israel. Even John himself seems to have had an expectation of Jesus which, though correct, was incomplete. This is because "Jesus had not yet fulfilled John's prediction that the Coming One would baptize the repentant in the Holy Spirit and destroy the unrepentant. He had not conformed to popular Jewish hopes by bringing political, social, and economic deliverance or by coming in the wake of such deliverance. His failure to do so caused disappointment." At the same time, "his performing miracles was more than the Jews expected the Messiah to do." In Matthew's view, these miracles "should more than counterbalance the disappointment."

Actually, when John asks if they should look for “another” Messiah, what he means is “another kind of Messiah.” Thus, Matthew appears to be using John’s question to indicate of Jesus that “his insides correspond to his outward actions.” Why would people...doubt and be scandalized by Jesus (as we know they were)?” It was because they considered Jesus’ deeds “without taking into account his words.”

For example, why did Jesus eat and drink and...associate with sinners and tax collectors?” He knew that these actions were offensive, but if we examine his words in this account, what we find is that Jesus somehow knew the inner motivations of the people he chose to associate with, and he frequently compared this sincerity with the hypocrisy of the religious authorities who talked a good game without ever acting upon it or even accepting it in their hearts.

And the other part of the message of Jesus is *the need to repent*. In Matthew’s account, “whole towns are upbraided by Jesus for not repenting.” For Jesus, much of the problem with those who did not accept him was that they were assuming “their privileged (prior) relationship with God would guarantee their “exaltation in heaven.” This false perception of their privileged position is what caused Jesus to reject them because their assumption was based on not having to repent.

This overall theme of the true identity of Jesus and the differing roles of John and Jesus brings us to the reason for making this passage such a focal point in Advent. The questions raised here are important in a season when “we expectantly await the arrival of the Messiah, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Unlike John, Jesus did not come simply repeating a warning of looming judgment on God’s people. He did not “take up the mantle and lifestyle of an ascetical prophet...(he) ate and drank with sinners and tax collectors and refused to take on himself the clothing and demeanor of one who was in mourning.” He did not “assume the roles of a Davidic warrior king or ruler. Indeed, he preached non-resistance, turning the other cheek, and self-sacrificial love.” He did not “march on Jerusalem nor did he thunder condemnation on Caesar or his legions.” So, we are dealing here not with the expected Messiah but rather with *the one God actually sent*, and the God of Israel continues to surprise us and challenge

us to examine all of our pre-conceived notions in order to grow and become more godly ourselves.

In the words of the *Magnificat*,

The almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation. He has shown the strength of his arm, he has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has come to the help of his servant Israel, for he has remembered his promise of mercy, the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children for-ever.

Amen.

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