

“STILL WAITING, LORD”

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 12th December 2004

Isaiah 35:1-10, James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11

A time of silence in the presence of God can be a treasured time of spiritual rest and nurture, but it isn't always. Perhaps just as often it can be confronting and uncomfortable. It can be a time when we feel more vulnerable to our doubts and anxieties. It can be a time when the questions that we'd rather not have to try to answer begin to plague us, and the absence of noise and business leaves us unable to drown them out or hold them at bay.

In the gospel reading today, John the Baptist is sitting in jail, perhaps with too much time on his hands and too much silence. Doubts and uncertainties begin to grow. If we were to read again the report of the day on which he had baptised Jesus, we would see that he seemed to be in no doubt then about who Jesus was, but now as he sits in his cell, he's not so sure. Jesus hasn't been quite the sort of messiah he'd been expecting.

The arrival of this messiah on the scene has not turned the world upside down in quite the way he had imagined. Maybe he'd been wrong about Jesus. Maybe he'd misread the signs. So next time he has visitors, he sends them off to Jesus with a question: “Are you the one we've been waiting for or should we be looking out for someone else?”

A fair question. People had asked the same question of John himself when his ministry of preaching and baptising was in full swing, and he'd had no trouble answering them: “I am not the one. The one who is coming after me is way out of my league. I'm only immersing you in water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire”.

But whatever John thought baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire would look like, it doesn't seem to be happening in any convincing manner. Perhaps that should come as no surprise. John was raised on biblical visions like this one from the prophet Isaiah:

When the Messiah comes the desert will burst into flower, the weak will be made strong, the poor will have plenty, peace and harmony will break out to such an extraordinary extent that even the snakes and wild animals will be harmless. And what's more, the Messiah will see to it that those who have oppressed and abused the people will get back what they deserve in full.

The Hebrew scriptures contain dozens of visions like that. We even have one attributed to John's own father, Zechariah, and another attributed to his Aunt Mary:

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

As John sat in prison facing a possible beheading thanks to King Herod, you can't blame him for thinking that the Messiah doesn't seem to have sent the arrogant and corrupt fleeing quite fast enough. No wonder he's asking the question: "Are you the one we've been waiting for, or should we be looking out for someone else?"

I don't know about you, but despite the fact that I'm not sitting in a prison fearing for my life, I can relate to the agonised uncertainty of John's question. I can relate to it when I see greed, callousness and corruption continuing to hold sway over the lives of ordinary people in this country and around the world. I can relate to it when I wonder why the love of Christ hasn't completely transformed a nation like ours, despite our miraculous escape from total civil war and social breakdown, and despite the fact that many proclaim allegiance to the Christian faith.

I can relate to it, when I read visions of world peace with swords being turned into plowshares and lions lying down with lambs, and then I turn on the news and hear of someone blowing themselves to pieces in order to kill a handful of innocent people on a bus. "Jesus, are you the one we've been waiting for or should we be looking out for someone who can make a bigger difference?"

Actually, even life in Hilton can be problematic - the failure of smaller scale expectations can be just as difficult for our faith. We may have experienced disappointment in ourselves, in others around us, in our parish... where things aren't quite as good as we might expect them to be if the world - and our own lives - were more nearly modeled on the life of Jesus the Messiah.

We don't know how John received the report of the answer Jesus gave, but I suspect it wasn't the cast-iron guarantee he was looking for. Jesus simply told the messengers to go and tell John what their eyes and ears were telling them: "the blind are given their sight; the paralysed are up and walking; people with hideous diseases are cured; the deaf can hear; the dead are raised; and the poor are hearing news worth celebrating." Certainly those things were included in the vision we heard from Isaiah, the vision John was expecting to see fulfilled. But was it enough to show that Jesus was the One? Jesus seems to be saying, "See what is happening and make of it what you will."

We are not told whether or not the answer John received, set his mind at rest. John seems to have been a character who would have preferred a simple "yes" or "no" answer, which is not what he got from Jesus. Yet as John went to his execution at the hands of Herod, we get no indication of a wavering faith, or of a sense that God's mission had not been fulfilled in his life, despite the way things were turning out.

And while that may not sound like the bold triumphal confidence that we might long for, it seems consistent with the exhortation we heard from the Apostle James in our other reading today: "My friends, be patient as you wait for the Lord's promises to be fulfilled. Take as your role models the prophets who brought us God's message in the past. They really suffered for their stand, but they remained faithful, never giving up, and their patience paid off."