

John's Question

2 Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Matthew 11:2,3

We ask questions for all kinds of reasons. There are rhetorical questions. When we ask those kinds of questions we don't expect an answer but ask them to make a point. Then, there are those who ask questions like the Pharisees, who simply want to embarrass their rival. Those experienced in the miry world of politics can spot those questions even before they're even half asked. Then there's the socialite who asks an open-ended question in order to break the silence at the table among strangers. Then there's the sincere seeker, no ulterior motives, no agenda, simply and truly wants a direct answer. Those kind of questions are few and far between. But personally, those are the only kind of questions I like to be asked.

Now John the Baptist asks a question. What kind of question is it to be? It's clear that he knows the answer. Anyone who reads the Gospels front to back and back to front knows this. From the text itself we hear Jesus extolling the virtues of John declaring him "greatest among those born of women" which I'm sure is something He wouldn't likely have done if John exhibited such doubts on his own behalf. St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, Dr. Martin Luther, and CFW Walther, examine the life of John, his soul purged in the stillness of the Judean wilderness where generations of prophets were moulded confidently proclaimed as Jesus descended upon Jordan's bank "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world". On Jordan's Bank the Baptist cried:

Announces that the Lord is nigh;
Awake and hearken,
for He brings Glad tidings
of the King of kings.

Not a chance does he ask the question for himself but as a catechist who desires his followers to follow the Lord. And like all catechists he asks questions. Catechisms are instruction books composed of questions and answers. Martin Luther in instructing on the Sacrament has questions and answers. The reason is that Jesus himself comes teaching with questions and answers. Sometimes the best thing a teacher can do is ask a question, tell the student to meditate on it, formulate an answer and reformulate it in his mind. The mind works and reworks and in the case of Christian catechesis the Holy Spirit works and in this sort of interplay we have the "working out of salvation" as Paul says.

John asks the question: "Are you the Christ, or should we expect someone else?" Walk with me. Walk with the disciples as they go to Jesus for an answer. It would be good to recreate the journey at least in our minds. It's a question we doubters might ask. Has Jesus really come? Adversity, sickness and death make us doubt. Possibly John's disciples were conflicted. Jesus claims to be God and all-powerful yet John remains in prison. And it sounds like it wasn't all that comfortable an experience either. Matthew 14 says that Herod had John "bound and put in prison". Could our Lord who says he loves John leave him bound in prison especially if he claims power? Wouldn't he have at least freed the forerunner? Therefore we are tempted to ask questions. Should we expect something or someone better? There's a whole lot of people hearing of the coming of our Lord in our world wondering variations of John's question.

Our Lord responds to John's question and our questions:

4 And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.

Beside each and every phrase of Jesus' answer we can find prophecy fulfilled. Therefore Isaiah 61:1 is oft quoted in discussing this passage.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
 To preach good news to the poor
 He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted
 To proclaim liberty to the captives
 And the opening of the prison to those who are bound.

Yes, this prophecy is fulfilled even in the case of John who remained physically bound in prison until the day Herodias danced and his head served on a platter. Jesus knows that the stronger shackles that bind a man are the shackles of sin. Jesus comes to set the prisoner free. Some of the greatest ministry has come from prison. John speaks to his disciples and asks a question. The apostle Paul sent forth letters – his great epistles from prison. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of all things a sermon for a wedding from prison. Even though he finds his activities limited, he immerses himself in the things he still can do. He reads God's Word, he writes, he prays. In this there is freedom. Yes, the prophecy is still fulfilled.

Some who have found themselves most free were paradoxically, the ones who appeared the most bound. Ironically to the world, St. Paul writes about contentment and freedom while in prison. While so many are shackled to the things of this world Paul contemplates his life without boasting but with sincere truth.

...Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to package up that kind of freedom to give to someone this Christmas? Absolutely possible by the grace of God. This is a freedom that no man can take away. The Christian witness throughout the centuries of those persecuted and put into prison for the sake of the Gospel is evidence enough of the power of God in my mind. Just a couple of weeks ago we studied St. Andrew. And the legend connected with him states how he continued to preach from his X-shaped cross. He was bound to his cross rather than nailed. He was most bound yet most free. He did not die like a pagan but strengthened by God's grace he had such composure that many were converted through his death. He followed our Lord who did likewise, who did not cry out, who did not blaspheme but simply said to God "Into your hands I commit my spirit".

But to show men that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sin and tramp down Satan under his feet our Lord did not keep his miracles, although the greatest, confined to the unseen areas of the soul of man, Jesus casts out demons and calls to the lame “Get up and take your mat and go home”. Rejoice!

Our Lord’s answer can only be met with rejoicing. Our Lord Jesus has come and has brought healing for us. Rejoice!

Inside your bulletins you have an explanation of the meaning of this Third Advent Sunday. It is Gaudete which means *Rejoice!* This Sunday a pink candle is lit to show that there is a special emphasis on the *Rejoice!* Purple is a colour of Royal Repentance and Mourning. True Sorrow over sin. But Pink tells us that something different happens here. We describe the Work of the Christ. We proclaim the Gospel. We proclaim the forgiveness of sins! God and Man are reconciled! *Rejoice!*

If you read anything about psychology and the reasons why so many people seek out a psychiatrist or a psychologist or a counsellor is because they can’t deal with the burden of guilt. Especially this time of the year, there is guilt. There is the homeless person we shouldn’t have shrugged off so easily. There’s the relative who should have received a phone call from us. There’s the extra offering we were going to give but somehow it got prematurely spent. Everyone has their own unique burdens of guilt.

But I say rejoice. “The poor have Good News preached to them”. The Good News is the Gospel. The Good News is the forgiveness of sins offered to us by the precious blood of Christ! The story of Christmas connects with the proclamations of the Baptizer quite easily. John the Baptizer says “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”. The Christmas angel descends to earth telling Joseph “You shall call his name Jesus for he will save His people from their sins.

Soon those who have prepared themselves confessing their sins, praying to God, having reverence for the Sacrament will approach the communion rail. Here is the very body and blood upon the cross. Here we hear our Lord’s words “Take and eat, this is the true body give to you for the forgiveness of your sins”.

There is no greater gift. It is the gift that can bestow peace of mind. It is the gift that ensures eternal life. It is the gift that restores our relationship with our Heavenly Father. The gift is ours through Christ Jesus. John’s question leads to Jesus’ answer showing forth the signs. All the signs as your bulletin covers depict and more. He casts out demons. He raises the dead. He unstops the ears of the deaf. He rules the waves. What is more, His power is seen as it is lived out in the lives of others. John the Baptist – sturdy prophet; Paul writing on freedom from prison; Bonhoeffer likewise finding contentment where none should be found.

Carry John’s Question with you this Advent Season. But more importantly carry the answer back to John, back to your family, back to your friends, back to your neighbours. See the signs. Behold the Saviour!

Amen.