3rd Sunday of Advent (A)
Matthew 11:2-11
The Disappointed Prophet

John the Baptist – the fiery prophet who proclaimed Jesus' coming. The fearless herald who drew crowds and rebuked religious leaders. The man who stood on the banks of the Jordan, calling people to repentance. Now he's in prison – paying the price for publicly rebuking Herod Antipas for marrying his brother's ex-wife – a union forbidden under Jewish law.

Picture John: confined to a small, dark, dank cell – wondering if his ministry has been for nothing – if his life has been spent in vain. It's a bleak place.

Given that setting, today's Gospel reading seems an odd choice for Advent. Shouldn't Christmas bells be ringing — at least faintly in the distance? Isn't it time for Mary and Joseph to appear?

Instead of preparing for Jesus' birth, we've leapt ahead ten chapters – and thirty years. It feels out of kilter. Or… is it?

The John we see today is very different from the one we witnessed last week. Then, John was full of confidence – certain of what was happening. Now, in prison, he hears reports of Jesus' activity –and doubts creep in. He questions what he's heard. Perhaps he's seeking validation for his work. It's a natural need – especially when life is hard or when things don't turn out as expected. Has it all been worth it? Was I on the right track?

So, John sends his disciples to ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

This prophet of God is wrestling with doubts and disappointments —searching for meaning. And here's the thing: as Christmas approaches, tension rises for many people. Fears, doubts, and questions intensify.

Requests for counselling and mental health support increase. So maybe this Gospel reading isn't so out of place after all. John isn't alone in his struggle. Many in our community are questioning the purpose of their lives – facing disappointments and grief.

John's loss of confidence isn't surprising. What he hears about Jesus doesn't fit his script for the Messiah. And Jesus' reply confirms it:

> "Go and tell John what you hear and see:
> The blind receive their sight.
> The lame walk. Lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised.
> And the poor have good news brought to them.
> And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me."

This isn't the Messiah John envisioned. He had preached judgment – the axe at the root, ready to chop down unworthy trees; chaff burning with unquenchable fire. But Jesus isn't pointing the finger of condemnation.

John languishes in prison for challenging Herod's behaviour. If Jesus were looking for chaff to burn, Herod would be a good start – topple him, become king, and set John free! But no. Jesus is befriending sinners. Spending time with outcasts. Healing and forgiving.

Jesus is gaining a reputation – but not the one John expected.

Let's be fair to John. He's not alone in his disappointment. Throughout his ministry, Jesus will fail to meet people's expectations. He will radically redefine what God's kingdom means. The same happens today. We all have expectations of Jesus – what kind of Messiah we want and how he should act.

Some want a fire-breather who condemns others. Others, a Jesus who champions their favourite cause. Some prefer an inoffensive Jesus who demands nothing – pats us on the back – and says we're fine. But eventually, our ideas collide with reality.

Jesus asks:

> "Do you want to follow the living Messiah – or worship your idea of who he should be? Do you want the hope and challenge of life with the living Messiah – or the comfort of an image of your own making?"

We try to put God in a box, but then God jumps out and challenges our preconceptions. It's unsettling – but if we face it, we may discover something new and life-giving.

John shows us the way. He has doubts and disappointments – but he doesn't cling to them. He goes to the source – he brings his questions to Jesus. We can do the same.

Jesus wasn't what John expected. He brought fire – but the fire of the Holy Spirit. He sought out sinners – and then forgave them. He let them have it – but what he gave them was mercy and grace. That's why Jesus says: "Blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me."

Blessed are those willing to have their imagination stretched – who allow God to work outside the square they've drawn. Blessed are those who aren't offended because they expected something else – but who recognise God's hand, the Spirit's work, Jesus' mercy – even when it comes in ways, places, and times they never imagined.

We come to Christmas with our own stories – anticipation and delight, sorrow and struggle, doubt and disappointment, dreams and hopes. When Mary and Joseph finally appear with their son, can we give all these stories to him? Because, as the carol says: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in him tonight."

We may be like John – held in our prison, confined by life's hardships – but then we discover something: God is bigger than we imagined. We may not get the answers we expected – but we can be sure of this: God will come to us – meet us in weakness, failure, sin, hurt, and grief –and transform us, gifting us with new life. Then, like John, we hear the report:

> "Go and tell John what you hear and see:
> The blind receive their sight.
> The lame walk. Lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised.
> And the poor have good news brought to them.
> And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me."

Lord Jesus,
When doubts and disappointments weigh us down,
help us to trust your mercy and grace.
Stretch our hearts to see you at work in unexpected ways.
Take our hopes and fears this Advent,
and meet us with your transforming love. Amen.

Alister Hendery
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