

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another." (Mtt.11:3)

John the Baptist came preaching a baptism of repentance. It was a call to people to change their behaviour. They were to prepare for someone more powerful than John who would baptise with fire and the Holy Spirit. He would also bring judgement on people. Jesus came to him for baptism. John's preaching condemned King Herod Antipas. He had taken his brother Philip's wife to be his wife. It was a serious sin. Herod locked John into prison, which begins the gospel reading today.

His imprisonment did not mean he heard no news. There would be other prisoners and the soldiers who told him about Jesus. He obviously had visitors who told him, he eats with the tax collectors and some of the town's riff raff. He forgives people their sins. John had lived austere, preaching judgement and the day of the Lord in much the way the old prophets had done. John wanted to know if Jesus was the expected Messiah. He sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus gives them a message to take back to John. It is a summary of what he was doing and the poor hear good news.

Jesus was not thinking of himself as an Elijah calling down fire from heaven. He was thinking of the great prophecies when Israel was restored after judgement. The first reading today from Isaiah is an example. "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. . . . Here is your God. . . . He will come and save you." The Messiah would not bring salvation like a soldier king riding a horse. He would be a humble king riding a donkey and carrying a cross. A cross which would bring an end to life, but also salvation for all who believe in Jesus.

Jesus, the Messiah, God's anointed one, had been obedient to the Father. God raised him from the dead. He showed life went on in a new. He ascended bodily into heaven, to his heavenly Father. He shares in the glory of the heavenly realm.

We read his words in the various parables, and in John's gospel. We think Jesus spoke about his return. We have an expectation that Jesus will come again. We say it in the creeds. "He shall come to judge the living and the dead." (Apostles') He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." (Nicene) We find verses in the New Testament that tell us that Jesus will come again. We might say it is picture language. But we need to get the picture right. It is not simply Jesus will come to earth. Paul gives us a picture. Jesus will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are left will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we be with the Lord forever. (1 Thess.4:15ff)

People asked Jesus when the end would come. They possibly meant the end of Roman rule. Many people have interpreted it as Jesus returning to the world and everything would be lovely and peaceful. Jesus, our Lord and Master, said no one knows when that will be, only the Father. The same could be said of the return of Jesus; only the Father knows. Until he comes in power and majesty, we see his presence of Jesus with us in the

community of faith. "We are the body of Christ, his Spirit is with us." We might wonder about that sometimes when there are fierce disagreements about what God wants us to do as a community. It does not alter the essential truth. We say at the Eucharist affirmation of faith, "Christ will come again" and understand his presence is in the bread and wine that are for us his body and blood. We understand that Jesus speaks to us as we read his words and think of them for our own life at this time.

It does not stop people from falsely proclaiming they are the Christ. Nor has it prevented people from claiming a new revelation of God or Jesus. We hear of cults that abuse the minds of young people. Or we could think of sects such as the Mormons, or the Jehovah Witnesses. We could rightly ask John Baptist's question, "Are you the one who is to come, or do wait for another?"

There are different stories about saints having some experience of Christ. Some are apocryphal, make-believe stories. The only one I know is the Roman soldier saw a naked man in the road. He took off his cloak, tore it in half and gave it to the man. Later in heaven, an angel says, "Lord, what's with the cloak?" Jesus replied, "My friend Martin of Tours gave it to me."

That story reminds me of the parable of the great judgement the Son of Man will bring. It is near the end of Matthew's gospel. Jesus' parable tells us "When the Son of Man [Jesus] comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory." He will separate the people of the nations like a shepherd; the sheep to his right and goats to his left. To the sheep he will say, "Come, blessed by my Father inherit the kingdom prepared for you." To those on his left he will say, "You that are accursed, depart from me." (Matt 25:34, 41)

This parable is a way to speak of God's judgement on both those who have done what God requires and those who have failed. To both groups Jesus explains they had fed him or failed to do so, clothed him or left him naked, visited him in prison or failed to do so, to mention some of their actions. Both groups ask the same question. How did we do this? He tells the sheep, "Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least in my family, you did it to me." To the goats he says, "Truly, I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

The story reminds us that while we wait for the return of Jesus in glory we might meet him in all kinds of situations. We might show compassion that causes someone to know the redeeming love of Jesus.