

Mt. 11:2-11. Third Sunday of Advent, other readings Isa 35:1-6a.10, James 5:7-10

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ARE YOU THE ONE WHO WOULD COME OR SHOULD WE EXPECT ANOTHER?

John's doubt about Jesus

The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called Sunday Gaudete, because the introitus or opening text of the liturgy begins with Gaudete, rejoice. We are halfway through, the third candle of the Advent wreath is lit. Yet the joy is not complete, because the gospel reading opens with John the Baptist in prison. Locked behind the bars of King Herod's dungeon, but also trapped in his own doubt about Jesus. Last Sunday's gospel (Mt 3:1-12) was about the revival movement that emanated from John. He was tapping into the expectation of his audience that they would be redeemed in the near future by a messiah, an anointed one, a king like David. Then they would be delivered from foreign domination, then justice and peace would reign. The time was ripe, the messiah would come soon. They were advised to repent immediately, for the axe was already at the root of the tree. He of whom John was the forerunner had the winnowing fork in his hand to separate the chaff from the wheat.

But now, in the dungeon, John began to doubt. The one whose coming he had announced turned out to be very different from what he had imagined. Instead of immediately cutting down the barren tree, Jesus gave him yet another chance (Lk 13:6-9). Instead of condemning collaborating tax collectors and sinners, he sought them out and ate with them. Instead of immediately weeding and burning the weeds, he lets them grow up to harvest together with the good seed (Mt 13:30). Was Jesus really the Messiah? Was he not a soft idealist, from whom nothing real could really be expected? Was he a powerless one who could not bring about substantial change? Had he, John, set his hopes on the wrong one? Out of his doubt, he sent some of his disciples to Jesus, asking: *Are You the One who would come, or should we expect another?*

Judging by what you see happening

Jesus does not say no and not yes. He only says: look and listen, and then draw your conclusions. Indeed, judgement had still not happened. God is apparently

in no hurry. He is evidently giving people another chance. We should be patient with a God who is patient with us. John assumed that after the judgment God's new world would begin. But Jesus shows that that new world has already begun. The signs are there. The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the good news is made known to the poor. This is about weak and sinful and poor people being uplifted. Old images are used here, already found in Isaiah, as we heard in the first reading: the blind, deaf and paralyzed can see, hear, and walk again, and the dumb will rejoice. Elsewhere, Isaiah speaks of prisoners being set free (61:1). In today's gospel reading, they are not mentioned. That would sound not fitting in a story where John is in the dungeon.

As I said, Jesus does not answer John's question with yes or no but says: judge for yourself. He concludes his answer with a beatitude: *Happy is the one who does not take offence at Me*. This benediction contains an admonition to John. Happy is he who believes in me, even if I do not live up to his expectations. Happy is he who believes in a God who does not immediately condemn, but in a patient God who always gives new opportunities to his people, who always lets them start again. And happy is he who sees that the new world has already begun.

We too are addressed

Did the story of the doubting John really happen or was this story composed only later, after the death of John and of Jesus? The exegetes' verdict on this is not unanimous. In any case, Matthew's gospel dates from after the destruction of the temple by the Romans in AD 70. The arrival of Jesus did not change anything politically. The occupier is still on his throne. The axe and winnowing fork of which John spoke have not been wielded. Whether John's doubt in the dungeon is a historical fact or not is irrelevant to us. What matters is what this story does to us. John's doubt is also ours. We too wish for an end to evil in the world, and right away. But Jesus' answer to John is also addressed to us. We are to be patient with a God who is patient with us. Moreover, we are called to believe that God's new world has already begun. For God's kingdom is becoming a reality in people like Jesus, and in people who allow themselves to be helped by him and want to follow in his footsteps. Our world, full of injustice and violence, does not have to be the way it is, it can change and is already changing.

People who believe see the same as people who do not believe, but they see it differently. They see the time we have been given as a time full of opportunity. No bitterness and resentment for what has happened, no despair and impatience regarding the future, but patience because God is a forgiving Father, who does not pin us down on our past but who challenges us to move on. People who believe in such a God also want to believe that his new world has already begun in Jesus and in people who follow in his footsteps.