

John the Baptist - The Kingdom of God with its Expectations.

Looking to what unfolded in Syria last week it bears some similarities with our reading this morning regarding John the Baptist.

It says in :15 'As the people were in expectation, all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ'. Christ simply means 'anointed' and all Israelites in those days were somehow living in the expectation of the coming of this special anointed person.

When he comes, it was believed, he would usher in the new reign of God over the world, beginning in Israel. Not only would it begin in Israel, but Israel would become the instrument with which God would rule all nations of the world.

The more the Jews lived under the oppression of the Romans, the higher and more fervent the expectations became about the coming of the Christ, the special anointed one; the fulfilment of the promises in the OT.

The expectation were so high and the oppression so severe, the people were longing for deliverance, very similar to how certain Syrians were waiting for their deliverance.

The expectations of the Israelites about John the Baptist mirror the expectations of the people in Syria. The enthusiasm and the eagerness of both the Israelites then and the Syrians now, are comparable.

Although, John's message regarding Israel was much difference from the messages we now hear from Syria, they both don't fall on deaf ears. Many want to hear of what will be said about the promising future and what role each has to play in it to make it come true.

John the Baptist's message is about creating the Kingdom of God by human endeavour. As we read: 'And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" 11 And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." 12 Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." 14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.....So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.'

The Kingdom of God as preached by John the Baptist is merely a kingdom that can be established by ourselves, By our own doing good and loving our neighbour as ourselves we then establish God's Kingdom on this earth.

Unfortunately, the message John brought to the people landed him in jail and it made an end to his preaching. The preaching of freedom to the people turned the other way for John and he became a prisoner instead.

Further on in the NT we can read that all what happened to John caused him to doubt about his own calling and in particular about the message he proclaimed.

In Matthew 11:2 we read: 'Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him: Are You He is to come, or shall we look for another?

In the Greek the word heteros is used, which means that John asks; are You He is to come, or shall we look for someone of another kind?

The message of John the Baptist about the Kingdom of God somehow mismatched the message Jesus was bringing to the people.

Jesus did not focus His message on the coming of God's Kingdom, but Jesus' message was that the Kingdom of God is coming through Him. Instead of a Kingdom of God inaugurated by human intervention, it is a Kingdom coming through God alone.

The centre of God's Kingdom is not on or for humanity, but in God through Jesus Christ.

One might ask; what does it matter, but it has much further implications than at first glance.

Once a research project was done on the different interpretations on the Kingdom of God and the project concluded of 8 different interpretations of the Kingdom of God over the centuries. Each of the 8 different interpretations lead to their own strands of theology. This then infiltrated someone's faith and lead them living their Christian life as they deemed right.

We must be careful in how we let our view on the Kingdom of God direct our lives. If our focus in our Christian living is not primarily on Jesus Christ, but on our own interpretations of the Kingdom of God, we could make ourselves prisoners of our own ideas.

The Kingdom of God is something which lies behind our own human understanding. And because it is beyond our understanding consequently it cannot be implemented by ourselves.

We pray it in the Lord's prayer; Let Your Kingdom come, but we don't know what it will be like. We might have the idea that it will be established with the so called Parousia, the return of Christ, but is it then completely absent now in our time? I don't know the answer, probably because I've heard and read about too many different explanations and expectations on the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps an ancient Rabbinic explanation on the Kingdom of God might be most helpful. It says that the greatness of a king is measured by the land and the number of people he is ruling. So it is with God, His greatness is measured by the many people who honour Him and who have excepted Him as the God to Who belongs this world.

If we take this Rabbinic saying as a guide to what is the Kingdom of God, the conclusion is that the Kingdom of God is constantly in operation and will find its conclusion in the time God has set and which is beyond our control. What left to us under our control is to honour God for what He has done for each one of us through Jesus Christ.

Hans