

Advent 3: John the Baptist –Holy Questioning?

[1 Corinthians 4: 1-5](#), [Matthew 11: 2-10](#)

John the Baptist, the fierce, relentless, ascetic: the insistent voice in the wilderness who took up the call of the Jewish hero-prophet Elijah, speaking out against those in power, disarming them, setting his call for seeking true righteousness against self-righteousness.

His was not the voice of the smooth, well-educated and politically astute leader from a palace chamber, one of those in “fine clothes”. He called people in their droves to the inhospitable waste places, earnestly and urgently seeking God and calling others to do so, to “clear the decks” for the coming Messiah who was on his way.

Yet even John, Jesus’ cousin, who had leapt in his mother’s womb in acclamation when Mary came to see Elizabeth, queried from his prison cell whether this Jesus really was “the one who was to come”: the long-awaited Messiah, the one for whom John had been waiting and seeking.

This episode from Matthew’s Gospel is a reminder of the earthy humanity of the people for whom the coming of the Messiah wasn’t something which was a done deal, a point in a past history in the way that we see it from our twenty-first century perch, but the real, ongoing struggle to work out exactly what God was saying in their here and now.

In that prison cell, knowing that he was in mortal danger, John is asking a searching question: “Jesus: is it really you?”

Do we find ourselves asking that same question?

John is the last in the line of the “wilderness prophets”, those of the “old dispensation” where God was anticipated in coming as a fierce avenger. Luke’s account of John the Baptist’s cry in the wilderness conveys this: “The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3:9)

Jesus’ response both raises up John as “more than a prophet”; one whose searingly powerful message was essential to prepare the people for his coming, and also demonstrates that Jesus has come with a new kind of power. The signs which show that Jesus is indeed “the one” are indeed powerful, but show power by restoring and redeeming humanity rather than destroying it. The evidence in people’s lives is clear: “the blind receive sight, and the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and good news is preached to the poor.”

How are you faring through this Advent time? Let us, with John the Baptist and the company of saints, both those here alongside us, and those who have gone before us, look earnestly for our coming King. Let us be honest as well as earnest, too, in our questioning. And may we be ready to receive answers which may surprise, challenge and delight us.

