

THE EMMAUS SERIES

3rd Sunday of Advent, Year A

Isaiah 35:1-6, 10

James 5:7-10

Mathew 11:2-11

Are you the one who is to come?

Waiting can be a time of soul-searching. Today's liturgy invites us to ask ourselves whether we are ready to hear the call of the Saviour, whose birth we are preparing to celebrate. Helpless in Herod's prison cell, John the Baptist is puzzled and discouraged, as he faced a similar question. He has generously pointed Jesus out - as the one who was to bring the realisation of Israel's hopes; why, he asks through his messengers, is God's prophet now suffering in prison at the hands of an unprincipled tyrant; why has the mission of Jesus not brought the time of justice God's people long for?

The reading from Isaiah – a typical example of the message of hope announced by the prophets – helps us to understand why John is puzzled. This magnificent proclamation describes what can be looked forward to, as a New Exodus - a time of liberation, healing and boundless joy, as those who have been banished are brought back to Zion. But this triumph of God is also described as a time of 'vengeance' and 'retribution'. Having for centuries lived in bitterness under a series of occupying powers, the nation's expectations emphasised this latter part of the prophets' message. They looked forward to a vindictive triumph that would crush their hated enemies. This heavily politicised interpretation of Israel's messianic hopes constituted one of the main obstacles to be overcome by Jesus, if he was to bring the people to enter into the inauguration of the final reign of God - about to take place in his own person.

God's triumph was not to be the imposition of divine power. The coming of God's kingdom involves collaboration on the part of our human freedom – inspired and sustained by the example of Jesus, who gave the needy and the powerless a privileged place in all that he did in the name of his Father, and lived out the 'new commandment' of love he had proclaimed. Jesus replied to John's inquiry, therefore, by pointing to the 'messianic signs' foretold by the prophets. But to those included in today's reading from Isaiah he adds another from the later Isaian writings: 'the poor have the Good News preached to them'. In a sense, the divine authenticity of his mission is summed up fully in these words - words that have echoed down the centuries in the life of the Church. In the continuation of our gospel passage, Jesus points to the gospel values so heroically embraced by John – in his courageous witness and his detachment.

The message of Jesus to John is, 'Do not lose faith in me; open your generous heart to the ways of God that define Israel's faith, and you will recognise that I am truly the one who was to come'. Jesus taught, we know, that in the present era the 'coming of the kingdom' is hidden and mysterious, overturning our human expectations. Our reading from James echoes one of the parables of Jesus concerning the coming of the kingdom (Mk 4:26), as James encourages believers in his community to imitate the farmer's patience, as the hidden seed grows.

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