

Third Sunday of Advent

Before we meet someone for the first time, we often have built up a picture of what this person may be like. But so often the expectations that we have about people prove to be quite wrong when we really get to know them. Today we get in touch with the expectations that John the Baptist had about Jesus, and the expectations that people had about John himself.

As we heard last week, John thought that Jesus was going to be God's judge. But John's picture of what Jesus was going to be like was not being fulfilled. We are told that John was already in prison when he sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the one that they were waiting for, or did they have to wait for somebody else? Jesus doesn't answer the disciples directly but tells them to look around and see what he was doing. "The blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor." What Jesus is calling John's disciples to notice can be interpreted in two ways. He could be calling them to notice in his works what the Prophet Isaiah spoke about in the reading we listened to today. They might then be able to say that Jesus was fulfilling the expectations that are contained there.

The other way of understanding what Jesus called John's disciples to notice is to say that that whatever the

expectations the people may have had about the Messiah, this is the way that God had chosen to come to his people. If people were expecting Jesus to be a Messiah like David in a political sense, then they would be disappointed. God's reign was to be established by the love, the care and the compassion that Jesus exercised towards those who were most in need. Jesus had come not to subdue people but to lift them up. Jesus had come not to win people over to him by force, but to draw people to him and his Father by the love he had for them.

Today Jesus invites not just the disciples of John to look around and notice what he is doing. Jesus is inviting us to look in a fresh way at what he is doing in our lives and in the lives of those around us. It is good for us to do this at the end of each day. St. Ignatius called it "The Daily Examen". Others choose to use the quiet moments that might come our way to look for where God is in whatever is happening around us.

In our gospel Jesus then goes on to ask his hearers what their expectations were about John the Baptist. Why did they go out into the desert? Was it to see a reed blowing in the wind or was it to hear a strong prophetic voice? Did they expect to see someone wearing fine clothes like Herod or someone dressed in the way that the great Hebrew prophets dressed? Jesus proclaims that John the

Baptist was in fact the greatest of the prophets. But he still belonged to old order. You and I, who might be the least in the kingdom of God, are still greater than he is. How could Jesus say that? I'm not sure that I really understand what Jesus means here. Maybe he is telling us that when we cooperate with the gifts of life and love that Jesus offers to us then we can do more than any of the prophets could do. Maybe he is inviting us to begin to understand what it means to live our lives in union with Jesus.

This third Sunday of Advent is the day we light the pink candle of our Advent wreath. We talk of that as the candle of Joy. It is a day to rejoice that our saviour is almost here with us again. The spirit of this day is very beautifully reflected by today's first reading from the prophet Isaiah. "Let the wilderness and dry lands exult, let the wasteland rejoice and bloom, let it bring forth flowers like the jonquil, let it rejoice and sing for joy. Courage! Do not be afraid. Look, your God is coming. He is coming to save you."

And the signs of God's saving action are described in terms of healing. "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, then the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy" But that healing can only be received by those who admit that they need to be healed When we see that we

are limping we are invited to leap like a deer because the Lord gives us the strength and power to walk again. When we admit that we are blind to the good things that the Lord has been doing for us, then the Lord will open our eyes. When we notice that we have been deaf to the words of life and hope that the Lord has been speaking to us, then the Lord will open our ears. When we admit that we have not spoken out for those who have been treated badly, then the Lord will move our tongues to sing with joy.

Often our hearts are slow to change. We all need time to become ready for the coming of the Lord. Today's letter from James urges us to be patient as we wait for the Lord to come. We are to be like farmers in the middle of a long dry Autumn waiting patiently for the rains to come. "You too have to be patient; do not lose heart, because the Lord's coming will be soon."