



Thought for the Week 13th December 2020 Third Sunday in Advent

Matthew 11:2-11

New International Version

² When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

⁷ As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.”

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Hope-Filled Expectation

During Winter time, the natural world experiences a period of waiting. The leaves have fallen, the flowers are gone, things look grey and bare. We know that there are seeds planted in the ground, hidden and dormant, but you might look out at your garden or at the flower beds in the park and wonder whether the colour and life of Spring will ever return.

Or think about long car journeys we sometimes make to see relatives around Christmas time. What is the eternal song that echoes from the children in the back seat? “Are we nearly there yet?” Their minds are fixed on the destination, so they wish the journey away.

I wonder if you ever waited a long time for something - a parcel, a job, some news, or something else - and at the end of your waiting, when the thing finally came, it turned out to be very different from what you expected? Maybe you were surprised, even disappointed, that it didn’t seem to live up to all that you had hoped? A lot of people who ordered a new Playstation 5 recently were shocked and dismayed when it didn’t arrive.

Beyond waiting for Spring, or for our destination, or waiting for parcels or jobs, some of us have waited on God. Maybe we wanted him to act, to answer a prayer, or to fulfil our dream. Perhaps you have experienced disappointment with God, if those things haven’t come, or haven’t lived up to your expectations. It is important that, rather than ignoring our struggles, we bring them to God. God can handle us being honest with him about how we feel.

John's Disappointment

John the Baptist is someone we sometimes think about around Advent, because he proclaimed the coming of Jesus. John would have been well aware of the promises from Isaiah about the coming Messiah:

*"Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come, he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution he will come to save you.'
Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert."* (Isaiah 35:3-6)

Put yourself in the place of John the Baptist for a moment. You've proclaimed the coming Kingdom of judgement and fire. You've criticised the "powers that be" and called them to repentance and radical life-change. You've seen Jesus baptised, sent out by the Spirit, and your hopes are well and truly set on him being the fulfilment of hundreds of years of waiting.

But then, suddenly, you're thrown in jail. And Jesus, although brilliant, isn't quite doing all the things you expected him to. The Romans are still in power. Corrupt priests and teachers are still in charge of the temple. The vengeance and divine retribution promised by Isaiah is not yet in evidence. Where's the judgement and fire you said was coming (Matt 3:7,11)? Matthew's gospel reports this:

"When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'" (Matthew 11:2-3)

John seems confused, even disappointed. This wasn't quite the glorious future he had imagined. Perhaps we can empathise with him in the areas where we've felt disappointed or discouraged. We should follow John's example of being honest with God about our disappointments - asking questions, lamenting difficult experiences, handing them over to Jesus. We see in this passage that Jesus is big enough to deal with our sadness and confusion.

A Surprising Kingdom

To understand what is going on with John, we can think back to the themes we've already explored in the past weeks. One is that Jesus is a different kind of King to the one everyone expected. His Kingdom is not about power and might, but about love and self-sacrifice. His victory doesn't come with swords and chariots, instead it lifts up the poor and sick and vulnerable. He doesn't force or coerce people to follow him, instead he reveals the heart of God to them and invites them freely to choose him as their Lord. So, Jesus responds to John:

"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." (Matthew 11:4-5)

These are actually all fulfilments of Isaiah's prophesy. They are beautiful, remarkable acts of kindness and justice. They are not, however, the judgement and victory over their enemies that Israel had hoped for and focused solely upon. This is not the goal that John had pictured, and so he begins to doubt if Jesus is the Messiah after all.

John has his mind so fixed on his idea of the destination that he is missing the journey. He imagined a future of judgement and justice which has not yet arrived, and he is allowing this to distract him from the signs of the Kingdom of God which Jesus is already displaying. Like John, we need to allow God to meet us in our waiting, to see how he is bringing his Kingdom around us even though we've not yet reached our final destination.

A Two-Stage Process

The second reason why John was disappointed is that he failed to see the two-stage process of what God was doing in Jesus. We spoke during the last two weeks about the "now and not yet" of God's coming Kingdom. The promises of the Old Testament *appear* to say that in one decisive moment God would establish his Kingdom, judge wrongdoing, and put everything right. However, in practice this plan has been split into two stages:

Stage One - Jesus, the Messiah is born to the world. He kicks-off the Kingdom of God on earth, bringing healing and truth and love. He dies to restore all of creation to God, and rises again the victorious King of the world. His resurrection body is like the first shoots of new life and growth coming out of the barren winter soil - a promise and a model of the new life which will come for all of creation.

Stage Two - God will complete the work he began in Jesus. The judgement of sin and injustice; the cleansing of heaven and earth; the putting right of all things - these promises have not yet been realised in their fullness.

The New Testament writers make it clear that we live in between Stage One and Stage Two, and that we are to wait with patience and hope for Stage Two to arrive.

Seeds of the Kingdom

In his letter, James uses an image of seeds planted in the ground to help us with this:

"Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near." (James 5:7-8)

God has shown us the seeds of his Kingdom. We've seen glimpses of the new life that came with Jesus, and hope for the restoration of all of God's creation. But right now, most of our seeds are still in the ground, and we won't see the fullness of the crop until Jesus returns. So God calls us to be faithful farmers - imitating Jesus wherever we find ourselves: using our gifts, caring for the sick, reaching out to the lonely, tending God's planet, proclaiming the good news - and trusting in that glorious day when the fullness of the harvest will come, and our disappointment will be no more.

PCI Let's Pray

Sunday 13 December • Moderator: Pray that the suite of teaching materials, specifically designed for use at home or in church. • Worshipping with Christmas in sight | Today as we worship with Christmas in sight, ask God that in the disruption to this festive season we will gain a better sense of the impact of the brokenness of sin and greater appreciation of our Saviour Jesus who came to restore our world.

Monday 14 December • Malawi | Give thanks for the relatively low numbers of Covid-19 cases in Malawi so far. Pray for the ongoing work and witness of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian in the country. • Volker and JinHyeog Glissmann | Pray for Volker (PCI global mission worker in Malawi) as he works offcampus as a programme developer for Theological Education by Extension College in Jo'burg, South Africa and revises the College's HIV & AIDs course, strengthening the theological reflection within the course.

Tuesday 15 December • University and College Chaplains | Pray for Rev Dave Gray at Queen's University Belfast and Derryvolgie Halls and Revs Cheryl Meban, John Coulter and Graeme Orr at the various campuses of Ulster University as they continue to support students during Covid-19 restrictions. • Universities and Colleges | Pray for students as they prepare for exams and enjoy Christmas. Pray for opportunities for Christian students and chaplains to share their faith with other students in 2021. •

Wednesday 16 December • Nepal | Pray for the stability of United Mission to Nepal's (UMN) continuing hospital and programme work and for the successful renewal of all the necessary agreements with the authorities. • Peter and Valerie Lockwood | Pray for Peter and Valerie (global mission workers) as they serve with the United Mission to Nepal, and their three children as they continue in partial lockdown and online schooling. Pray that God would continue to guide the family and give them a good rest this Advent season.

Thursday 17 December • Home Mission congregations | Give thanks for the ongoing work and witness of the 74 PCI home mission congregations throughout Ireland. Pray that each congregation will be able to meet physically together this Christmas and that this will be a time of blessing. • Home Mission ministers | Pray for the ministers who lead these congregations, who often have more than one charge. Pray for wisdom and encouragement and as they minister, often in isolated areas.

Friday 18 December • Social Witness | Give thanks for the approval of vaccines to fight Coronavirus & for all who assisted in the development. Pray for the vaccine programme as it is launched & used in residential, nursing & hospital settings. • Palliative Care | Give thanks for those who use their skills and abilities to provide end of life care. Ask God to fill them with grace and compassion as they affirm the value and dignity of human life.

Saturday 19 December • General Council | Pray for the ongoing contact Church leaders, including the Clerk & Moderator, have with both the NI Executive & the Irish Government. Pray that, in their decision making, both officials & Ministers take account of the representations of the churches, especially with regard to balancing the importance of Christians being able to gather for public worship with necessary restrictions related to Covid-19. • Training in Ministry | The nine current Auxiliary Ministry trainees have been assigned to congregations to receive mentoring in preaching over the next four months. Pray for the trainees, that God would develop their ability to preach his Word and lead his people in worship, even during these testing and disruptive times.