
The sermon text for today is based on the Gospel,
Matthew Chapter 11, verses 1 to 2.

Provided by The Lutheran Church of Australia

¹After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. ²When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” ⁴Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵The 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. ⁶Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.” ⁷As 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? ⁸If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. ⁹Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ ¹¹Truly 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.

In today’s text, Matthew tells us that John is in prison. He had been arrested by Herod because John had condemned Herod’s adulterous relationship with his brother Philip’s wife. John was simply being faithful to God’s Word. John the Baptist showed his love for God by not compromising his word, and he loved Herod too—really loved him by pointing out the hard truth to him and calling him to repentance, in accordance with God’s own definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13—that love rejoices in the truth.

Okay—people don’t like to hear the truth that hurts—but being imprisoned for speaking it? It wasn’t meant to turn out *like this* for John, was it? Maybe

that's the reason for John's question of Jesus: "Are you the one to come, or should we wait for another?" The reason behind John's question has resulted in quite a deal of debate and uncertainty among scholars for a long time. Was John doubting that Jesus was really the Christ? After all, John has faithfully prepared the way for him. Yet instead of the situation getting better it has only become worse. John had proclaimed that the Christ would come to bring judgment on evil—and now languishing in prison as a victim of injustice perhaps that is what John is longing for Jesus to do for him.

Or perhaps John was uncertain or confused because his proclamation was of a Messiah coming to bring judgment. He had heard in prison of the works Christ was doing—but where was the swinging of the axe that had gone below stump level and was already at the roots? The only works John had heard were those of forgiveness, healing, and mercy—would another follow Jesus, who would perform these works of judgment?

Or could it be that John's question is not one of doubt, but really a question of trust—expecting confirmation and verification for what he already knows? The fact that John sends a delegation to Jesus with his question and awaits an answer from him proves his faith in Jesus. I'm not so sure it need be an either/or answer. Could it not be all of these thoughts are running through John's mind while he waited and waited in prison?

It seems like we wait and wait too. Come Lord Jesus we pray. We don't like waiting, especially in today's society. But today's text doesn't just leave us with the questions. Jesus gives his own response. Notice that Jesus doesn't say: "Yes, go and reassure John that I'm the Messiah." But Jesus says: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them." This is the best assurance possible, for what Jesus says is the direct fulfilment of what God promised through Isaiah in today's Old Testament reading. Jesus is the fulfilment of what has been promised from of old. He has been doing precisely these things since the beginning of his public ministry. He has preached in the synagogues. He has cast out demons. He has healed many from their

sicknesses including a lame man and a blind man. The miracles point to his authority and power over all things, even to release people from their sin and the kingdom of darkness, and to be victorious over the power of death itself. It's no wonder Jesus tells them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard."

Perhaps at some point or other we can all relate to John the Baptist as he waited in prison. Just like John, everything we might expect or hope for from God is not always fulfilled in the way we'd like, or with the timing we'd like. Maybe it's an illness that we or a loved one suffer, or the troubles of our family. Maybe it's a time of difficulty we're going through, or maybe it's wondering about an uncertain future. We might feel trapped and isolated with burdens nobody else could understand. We might feel imprisoned by our frail bodies or our own sinful human natures.

Yet the season of Advent focuses our attention on God who did not abandon his creation but stepped into it in the person of Christ and was born in that stable at Bethlehem. However if Advent were just a reminder of what had happened in salvation history then it becomes emptied of so much hope and power. Neither is Advent only about hoping Christ will come again one day. In *The freedom of a Christian*, Luther says

“...it is not enough...to preach about Christ just by telling what he did and said, simply as a story or as historical facts. Just knowing these things doesn't necessarily make any difference to how a person lives.

Instead, Christ ought to be preached about in such a way that faith in him is kindled and kept burning, so that he is not only Christ, but Christ for you and me; so that what we are told he is and does takes effect in us. Such faith is produced and grows in us when we are told why Christ came, what he has brought and given us, and what good things we have when we have him.”

Together with our remembering and hoping, this is why the season of Advent is so special. Jesus came for us. He was born, truly human, for us. Born there in a stable surrounded by dirt and animals and their waste, Jesus came to us

to know what it means to be a person and live in vulnerability and weakness and brokenness. He overcame temptation for us and lived perfectly for us. He came to rescue us and bring us true freedom by calling us into God's Kingdom.

No one knows when he will come again but he tells us where he comes now with his re-creative power at work. He tells us where he comes in the midst the suffering of this world to bring the Good News to the blind, the lame, the sick, and the poor. Through the Holy Scriptures he continues to teach us, just like he taught his disciples in verse 1. He raised us from the dead and brought us his new life and resurrection power in baptism. He continues to bring freedom and release through the holy meal he serves his people which is not just bread and wine but his own flesh and blood. As he ministers to us through these ways, he calls us to wait—and to wait *with him*. As we do wait for his return we can rejoice that he will never leave us. As we wait with our Advent King and gather around him to be served by him, we proclaim to the world that he has trampled over death and lives today, and that he uses his authority to bless unworthy sinners with the abundant grace of God, so that there is hope and strength, joy and refuge in even the darkest places of human experience.

Blessed are those who do not take offence at Jesus' words! For those who cherish Jesus' words rather than taking offence at them can only do so because they have first been blessed by God. And those who have been blessed by God so that they do not take offence at the words of his Son—but hold firmly to them in faith—will see John the Baptist and all the other saints of all times and places, as we gather around the throne of the Lamb in heaven.

Amen.