

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Third Sunday in Advent
11 December 2016

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 35:1-10 Luke 1:46-55 James 5:7-10 Matthew 11:2-11

Here we have two of the great figures of Christianity: John the Baptizer who has an enormous following and Jesus who also has a significant following. The question is which is the right one to follow. They do have slightly different messages. John is professing a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins. The traditions have them associated possibly as cousins. There's this understanding of John as the precursor and forerunner of Jesus and his message.

In the gospel today John is in prison. Probably some of the most extraordinary depictions of John in prison come from Richard Strauss's opera *Salome* which is written to the libretto by Oscar Wilde. It's one act and it's got a dance of seven veils in it. Imagine Birgit Nilsson doing that! That was a joke. She was a very large woman. *[laughter]* She was a Swedish singer who, when asked what the best preparation for singing Wagner was, said, "*A good pair of comfortable shoes.*" *[laughter]*

But here is John the Baptist who has a message and crowds of people listening to him, paying attention to him, finding him credible, and Jesus who also has a following, and the question to ask is which guy is right? Who do you follow? Who do you listen to?

So John is in prison. He's in a bad way. He says to his disciples, "*Go ask Jesus who he is. Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another? Are you the guy to follow me and my message or is it somebody else?*" Well, Jesus answers him not aye, yes or no. Jesus doesn't say, "*I am the messiah.*" That would be easy for us, wouldn't it? Then we could beat people over the head with "*We know!*" It would make it easier for us to choose which guy to follow. The guy who says, "*Repent and turn away from your sin*" and I think there might be a suggestion in there that you can save yourself. Jesus doesn't say that. He doesn't say, "*I am the messiah.*" He simply says, "*Go and tell John what happens to people who are blind, who are deaf, who are lame, who have incurable diseases, who have cancer and AIDS and leprosy. Tell John what happens to the dead who have a relationship with me.*"

Fulton Sheen was talking about the problem of poverty in a re-broadcast today and making a distinction between poverty as a problem and poverty as a mystery. He did a very interesting examination of poverty as sometimes seen in terms of property. When economies go through good times and bad times poverty is at the bottom of the oscilloscope. But we also know that poverty is systemic. Poverty is related to racism. Poverty is related to classism. Poverty is related to all kinds of empirical economies, etc., etc., etc. I don't think Sheen mentioned this, but we also know that Jesus says to us, "*The poor you always will have with you.*" There is a mystery about life for which the poor and in which the poor have an important role for us. My guess is that it might be the same role that the law has for us. You may remember that at the time of the Reformation there was a discussion of what the law was useful for. The Reformers agreed that one of the uses of the law was as a model for government - how to set boundaries, control property and deal with what you own, including your wives. The other use of the law was to use it as a mirror because if we read the law honestly it will condemn us.

So I think maybe Jesus sees the poor in the same way that the law was seen by the Reformers - as a constant reminder of who we are not, how much work there is left to do in advocating for justice for others and fairness in the world and that that job is never ever done. But the one thing the Reformers could not agree to in

terms of the law was the third use of the law which was a way to work your own righteousness - that you can't take the law and say, *"I obey it pretty good and therefore I am pretty good. I obey it better and therefore I am better. You don't do it as well so you are worse."* The law was not to be used as a model for our lives because we can't live up to it. It's there to remind us of our need for the mercy of God. I haven't thought it all through but could it be that the reason that the poor are always with us is to be a stumbling block for us who have so much and a reminder to us of our own selfishness, our own cupidity, our own self-centeredness, our own deep-rooted sinfulness?

So Jesus and John have slightly different directions for their theological tracks. John wants to know about Jesus. He's in jail, and he has nothing else to do but think about his competition, I suppose. He sends his friends to find out whether or not Jesus is going to say he is the messiah. And Jesus doesn't. Jesus simply says, *"Go back and tell John, my cousin, the forerunner, whoever he is - go back and simply report to him the effect that having a relationship with me has on people in need, that it has on the poor."* That doesn't say that it makes the poor rich. It says that the poor receive good news. What might that be? That they could become like the rest of us? And have more? Or that the good news might be that we who have so much might learn from those who have less, that we who are empowered might learn from the disenfranchised and the unpowerful, that we who are healthy might learn from those who are afflicted, that we who are deaf might learn to hear from those who learn to hear a different way, that we who are blind might learn to see from those who have learned to see without eyes or eyes of a different kind.

One of the unintentionally cruel things that I believe I encountered in Rome was a sidewalk. There are in airports and all over the place in Rome grooves in the footpath, the pavement, and in places there are stippled dots. I think they are there for blind people to show them which way to go. I was walking along a sidewalk one day and I was looking at the grooves and they turned right into a blank wall! Well, if you build a building, you'd better change the sidewalk. I could just see someone walking right into a wall. The point is who we follow and where that leads us as Christians and as we spend time in advent anticipating what the nativity of Jesus is about and what the incarnation of Christ might mean for ourselves. We are asking the same question that Jesus was asked. Is this God's messiah? And Jesus doesn't say yes. I suppose he could have, and you may believe that he is, but the astounding thing is the scandal involved in what Jesus said because the messiah who was waited for was seen to be and expected to be a well-armed white knight on a steed who was going to come and crush the opponents with firepower, with weapons, with arms, with strength, with armies. And so Jesus says, if that's the messiah you're looking for, I'm not doing that. I am instead having a relationship with all of the people your messiah would walk over. I am in love with the people your messiah would cream. I am in love with the people that your messiah would ignore or exclude or write off. I am in relationship with people who are off the radar of empire and strength and position and wealth and power. I am in love with the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, even the dead.

So Jesus doesn't say, *"I am the messiah."* He doesn't say, *"I'm not the kind of messiah you're looking for."* He simply says, *"Report back to John what happens to people with whom I am in a relationship."* And then he says the most astounding thing, and these are the words to take away with you today: *"And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."* Well now, that's peculiar, isn't it? And what happens as we follow Jesus' life? The state, the Church, the politics, and the economy all take offense because the poor hear good news, because the lame walk, because the blind see and the deaf hear and those afflicted with incurable diseases are healed.

Could it be that all of those people are given by Jesus a sense of their own self-worth that came to them neither from Church, society, politics or economy? So that the leper didn't see himself primarily as a leper but as a human being with a problem for which God was the solution rather than a problem, a beloved human being. The lame person didn't see himself as an affliction but as the object of divine love who had a challenge to meet. The blind person who may not have been able to see with his eyes could see in Jesus and in the relationship he had with Jesus a different kind of messiah than even John was looking for, a God who was present in the lives of all of these people - even the dead - with a promise that they had, despite their afflictions, despite their categories, despite their countries of origin, their national heritage, their primary languages, despite their pocketbooks or lack of them, were objects of divine affection, *full* divine affection, not because they deserved it, not because they earned it, not because they did the right thing, but because they were people. They were God's creatures and they were loved by God.

And blessed are you if you don't take offense at this idea. But people do. We know it, don't we? We know it personally. This is not a particularly popular message, that God could love our enemies. It makes theologians ask questions. It makes people like John the Baptist and other clergy people ask questions. Well, thank God the questions are asked and thank God that we are called together to be in relationship with this Jesus, messiah or not, who changes *us*, who heals our leprosy, who opens our eyes, who helps us to walk straight, who gives us ears to hear each other, and who raises us from death to live in a world in a very different way because we are in relationship with Jesus - and dare I say this - and not with John the Baptist who ain't a bad guy. John the Baptist had a huge following - big church, enormous parking lot. But Jesus' message was different and it's beautiful because when we take the law and read it honestly, we will be condemned. If we follow the invitation to be self-righteous and think that we can turn away from our sins without God's help, that we make our confession and we live our lives purely and beautifully according to the law etc., etc., etc. and we are therefore better, then we will be condemned. But we are falling more and more desperately in love with a God who loves us while we were still sinners, not because we did good, not because of all of those lovely things that Christians do.

I'll tell you one thing about Rome - you get really tired of seeing burial places of holy people. You know they were schnooks. I mean the name above the door at the primary entrance at St. Peter's is Borgia. That's almost synonymous with evil. In a book I'm reading about English country churches at the moment, this statement was made in what I was reading yesterday: "*The closer to the church, the further from God.*" This came out of the Reformation. We need to remind ourselves of that. That doesn't mean we need to condemn what we are and do, but we need to always be in the business of bringing a corrective to that because the differences are subtle between John the Baptist and the messiah. And Jesus doesn't have any issue about being the messiah or not. He says, who cares? He simply says, what's the effect I have on other people? And I'm willing to say Jesus also said, what's the effect they've had on me? And that's our only test as Christian people - whether or not we have a messiah and who it is we worship coming at the nativity of Jesus and what God means to us in our gathering. What effect do we have on each other and the world? And do not be surprised because Jesus anticipated that some will take offense, not because you've done anything offensive other than loved God's children - all of them, with or without documents, with or without money, with or without membership. Those who do not take offense, Jesus says, are blessed.

So I have a suspicion that we're not going to need to cover bodies in silver foil and place them in glass caskets underneath altars. Rome is just loaded with that kind of garbage. It's disgusting! That's not what it's all about. It's about a living relationship with a Creator God who is large enough to forgive us of our inadequacies

and our sinfulness and a group of people who are honest enough to say, *“If God can forgive me, God can forgive any other louse in the world.”* It starts with the kind of humility that acknowledges our own need as the greatest and our own delight in sharing generously, joyfully with all what we have received. Then the poor, who are a mystery and always will be, will hear from us something other than bad news. They will hear good news - and don't ever think that money is the equivalent of good news. They will know that they are loved by God because we have run the risk of loving them ourselves, and we will have run the risk of having been enriched by people who we think have nothing and we are yet being made wealthier than we already are with the gifts of the poor. We are, friends, takers but we can be givers. We know who our messiah is. Thanks be to God!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.