



3rd Sunday in Advent Year A - He who is to come

A homily by Fr Robbie Low

Readings: *Isaiah 35: 1-6, 10, Ps 145, James 5: 7-10, Matthew 11: 2-11*

If you are eagerly seeking one of the ministries listed by St Paul, it is my strongest advice that you do not volunteer for that of Prophecy.

The initial attractions of thinking that this would enable you to predict the future or, by some miraculous second sight, have foreknowledge of the winning numbers in the Euro Lottery, will soon enough be swept away by the grim reality of the task in hand.

Prophets are not there to do a sort of 'Mystic Meg' routine but rather to speak the Word of God to the People. If there is an element of prognostication it is always in the context of calling to repentance.

i.e. 'If you go this way it will have such and such a consequence, usually ill'. But, if you return to God's way, then this will be the result.

They are given the task, almost always unpopular, of speaking the truth and telling people of all rank and degree what they do not wish to hear.

From Elijah sitting miserable and depressed in the wadi, bemoaning his exile and persecution, through Jeremiah's suffering and the Babylonian

siege through to the incarceration and state murder of John the Baptist, the lot of the prophet is not a comfortable one.

Their problem is that they are almost always compelled to tell people and rulers and nations what they do not wish to hear.

Today, in the Gospel, we encounter John the Baptist in his last days. Gone are the huge baptismal gatherings on the banks of the Jordan.

Gone is the Messianic excitement, the expectation of the people that this 'once upon a time' miracle child will turn out to be the Messiah. John is currently banged up in a dank cell in the Herodian fortress awaiting his fate for his temerity in condemning the wife-swapping arrangements of the puppet kings of Judaea.

His main mission, to prepare the way of the Lord, to call the nation to repentance and point to the true Messiah, is behind him.

His loyal band of disciples will linger on for a few years but ultimately disperse or follow Jesus. The best he can hope for is life imprisonment.

And so we hear the voice of the great forerunner echoing down the years and we have some sympathy for him in his plight.

He sends a message to Jesus, via his own disciples, 'Are you He who is to come or do we look for another?'

This question is both astonishing and shocking. The very one who has proclaimed the Christ and the kingdom seems now to be harbouring doubts or, at the very least, desperately needing reassurance that his life's work was not misguided or in vain.

We, who live in the aftermath of Christ's saving work, needs remember what it was that Israel was seeking in a Messiah at that time. A prophet greater than Moses, a king to succeed David, a high priest to replace the squalid collaborators of the current regime. Above all and contained

within that, they were expecting liberation from the imperial power of Rome.

What, John urgently requires to know, is happening to fulfil this impossible Curriculum Vitae?

Is what he believed and preached and taught and witnessed to really true?

It is a question that, at some point or another, tease and torment most faithful souls, prophets or not. John needs reassurance in the face of his fate and his mortality. And in this, I believe, we lesser mortals can find both empathy and reassurance. The great ones of the Faith have their moments of doubt and darkness and even despair. But note this common characteristic....They do not turn away from God at these times but rather turn to Him. John reaches out to Jesus for reassurance. Elijah calls on God from his depths. Jeremiah is in constant dialogue with God in his persecutions. Jesus himself calls out in his last agony, 'My God why have you forsaken me?'

This is not the prayer of atheism or agnosticism but the deepest prayer of the human heart to God.

On the borderline of our mortality we need, with the prophets, that simple reassurance that it has not been in vain, that what we have lived and preached and taught and tried to pass on to the next generation is true and indeed eternal.

And Jesus sends back his answer to Johnand to us.

To those who are in the prison cell of this fragile mortal flesh and in the condemned cell in the dungeons of death awaiting the final call, Jesus speaks of the blessedness of those who are not 'scandalised' by him .

The Gospel Greek translates literally not as 'those who do not lose faith in Him' but as 'those who are not scandalised by Him, who do not find Him to be a cause of our stumbling and falling, as we confront His claims to be the Son of God and to reconcile the fallen world to the Father.

These are massive claims and who could criticise a man for a momentary wobble in accepting them? The Presence of the Lord Christ grants, to our desperate plea, the reassurance we need. It is this gift that we find in the Mass and this glorious liberation from the prison cell that we experience in the deceptively coffin – like box in the wall of the church, the Confessional. One houses the central mystery of the world. The other, like as with John's great call to repentance, prepares us and leads us in the way to that same and eternal mystery of grace.

In answer to John's question and ours....

He is the One who is to come and we need look for no other.