

## **Is he the Messiah?**

**by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> December 2025

Reading(s): Isaiah 35; [James 5:7-10]; Matthew 11:2-11

Third Sunday of Advent, Lectionary Year A

### **Introduction: Expectations**

Are you looking forward to Christmas? I expect your answer would depend on what you expect Christmas to be like this year. Typically, children look forward to Christmas with a great deal of excitement, anticipating the festive atmosphere, and of course, the arrival of presents, whether from the bearded gentleman in red or from their parents and family.

For others, though, there may be an expectation that something will be lacking this Christmas – the presence of a loved one who is no longer with us. May this experience of pain and loss be mitigated by the warmth of the company and friendship of others.

So, on the day, we may discover that Christmas meets or exceeds our expectations, or is a bit of a disappointment, for any number of reasons. Whatever happens, we will measure our experience against our expectations.

This, of course, is true of the whole of life. And it applies to our faith journey too. Having decided to believe in God and to commit our lives to him, we wonder what difference this will make to our experience of life. If we pray to God about something, what kind of answer do we expect to get? How

long must we wait to see God act? And what if things go differently from what we expect and hope for?

## **John the Baptist**

Today's gospel reading focusses on John the Baptist. Last week we were introduced to him in chapter 3 of Matthew's gospel as the fiery preacher warning the people of Israel to turn away from their sins and be baptised in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Israel had been waiting for centuries for God to send the King who would put an end to injustice, defeat Israel's enemies and bring in an era of peace and harmony. The wicked would be punished, and the righteous vindicated. As John put it,

“His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”<sup>1</sup>

Under the Messiah's rule there would be no room for violence or oppression or ungodliness. That's why people needed to get their lives straightened out and be put right with God.

When Jesus turns up at the Jordan, asking John to baptise him, John is sure that Jesus is the One, and protests:

‘I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?’<sup>2</sup>

Today we skip forward several months, we don't know how many. John has been arrested and imprisoned for criticising Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Perea, for marrying his brother's ex-wife. We don't know how long he has been held

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:12 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 3:14 NRSV

when chapter 11 opens, but it is clear that John has lost his certainty and is experiencing a lot of doubt. John had grown up with a sense of destiny – the Messiah was soon to appear, and it was his job to make the people ready. And now Jesus had come, but from what John was hearing it didn't seem as though Jesus was doing the things the Messiah was supposed to be doing – like preparing a political programme that would get rid of the Romans, restore the Kingdom to Israel and bring in an era of peace and justice.

“Have I got it wrong?” John is asking himself. Jesus may be a prophet, but is he also the Messiah? Jesus doesn't seem to be meeting John's expectations. I wonder if we too have doubts about our faith when God doesn't seem to meet *our* expectations?

I find it interesting how Matthew opens up this episode in verse 2 of chapter 11. He has already told us in chapter 1 that Jesus is the Messiah, and now he writes:

<sup>2</sup> When John heard in prison what *the Messiah* was doing, he sent word by his disciples <sup>3</sup> and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’

Jesus answers by pointing John to the actions that he is doing – restoring sight to the blind, healing the lame, the lepers, the deaf – and even raising the dead. There are clear echoes of the prophecy we read in Isaiah 35:5-6

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer...

Think also of another prophecy of Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.<sup>3</sup>

Did you notice the word “anointed”? Messiah means “the anointed one”. The works that Jesus was doing were signs of the Kingdom of God that was coming, and evidence that he was the Messiah. In God's purposes it was not yet time to bring in the kingdom in all its fulness, but what God was doing in the ministry of Jesus showed that God was already at work, bringing transformation and calling people back to himself. And the most important part of God's plan, which John hadn't bargained for, was that Jesus himself had to die for the sins of the world and rise again.

### **The challenge of the “not yet”**

John was wrestling with the gap between his expectation of what the Messiah would do and what he heard was actually happening. Some people today ask why 2000 years after Jesus came there are still wars and suffering. If God is all-powerful and all-loving, why doesn't he intervene to put everything right in the world?

The message of the New Testament is that we are living in an “in between” time. Jesus has come to announce the Kingdom. The mission of the church is to continue to announce the Kingdom, and to be the agent through which God works to

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 61:1-2 NRSV

bring healing, reconciliation and release from oppression today. When we offer ourselves to God to be his agents in the world, we will see him at work through us to bring healing, reconciliation and release to others.

There are signs of hope all around. The work of the church in the past 2000 years has included spreading the gospel to all corners of the earth, transforming lives, helping the poor, founding hospitals, releasing slaves, fighting for safer working conditions, comforting the dying, bringing reconciliation between warring communities, and being a beacon of hope amid the darkness of despair.

John needs some assurance that will give him hope. And Jesus' answer points to the fulfilment of prophecy in his own ministry. He is saying to John, "Yes, this is it, you were right. Now hang on in there". And he says the same to us today – yes, this is it. God hasn't finished yet. Hang on in there, play your part, have faith, see the bigger picture.

### **Greater than John**

When the disciples of John have left, Jesus affirms John's role and work:

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus describes John the Baptist as the last great prophet of the pre-Messianic era. But the Kingdom of God that we are now part of is greater than all that came before.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 11:11 NRSV

Have you ever been part of a surprise birthday party? The birthday person has been told by their partner or friend that they're just going out for a quiet meal. Then they open the door and are greeted by a whole roomful of people singing "Happy Birthday". Surprise!

In the same way, if we trust God to lead us, there will be many pleasant surprises, as he answers our prayers for others or for ourselves, all small signs of the bigger plan that God is bringing about for the world.

How God works in the world, and in our lives, may not be matching our expectations of what God should be doing. Like John the Baptist, we may have doubts, especially in difficult times. But Jesus invites us to hang in there, to be patient and to trust God, who has a massive job on his hands, but is more than capable of bringing it to completion for the ultimate good of his whole creation.

As James writes in his letter:

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.<sup>5</sup>

Advent invites us to look forward with confidence to the day when God will bring all of his good purposes to fulfilment. In the meanwhile, we are called to be Jesus' ambassadors in this world, keeping our eyes on him, and bringing love and hope to those around us.

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<sup>5</sup> James 5:7-8 NRSV

This Christmas, let's lay aside *our* expectations of what we want, and keep our eyes open to see what God is doing in the world. As the message of Jesus' first coming is proclaimed, through carol services, through carol singing in the streets and pubs, and through the welcome we offer, would you pray with me and believe that God will touch the hearts and minds of those we share Christmas with? Let's pray that this Christmas many will come to know the mystery and the wonder of God's love for them, and in turn become agents of God's purposes for the world.