

Sermon for Sunday, December 15, 2013 Advent III Early Service Matthew 11:2-11
"Know What You're Getting Into"

You'd think that John would recognize his own cousin, the one he baptized in the Jordan, when God said in those deep, booming tones: "This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well-pleased." If you needed a message telegraphed that this was the Messiah, what more could you ask for?

And yet John, locked away in prison because he had chastised Herod for taking his brother's wife, feels like he has to ask the question. "Are you the one? Are you the Messiah?"

You'd think Jesus would be a bit put off by that, but when he gets that message from John, he simply gives John the information necessary to confirm his status: he quotes an excerpt from the prophecy of Isaiah that we heard a few moments ago: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

The gospel writer Matthew never gives us John's reaction to that information. The presumption is that the answer is sufficient, because Matthew then turns away from this cousin-to-cousin dialogue and reports on Jesus' preaching about John.

Jesus lauds John as a fiery prophet, even more than a prophet, the fore-runner of the Messiah. Remember that John is a political prisoner, so it's a highly risky thing to do. But the people, who have already embraced John as a prophet (remember him baptizing people from all over the area in the Jordan?), are happy to hear Jesus say these strong words in support of John.

They might have worried that Jesus would say bad things about John, because there was already a strong tradition of competing religious reformers in Israel at that time. The Pharisees were religious reformers. So were the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Zealots. And it was common practice for an advocate of one group to say harsh things about another.

But here was Jesus saying that this political prisoner, his cousin John, was an ally. More than that, John was a fore-runner. He was intended to prepare the way for the Messiah. That's a sterling endorsement.

But then Jesus says something that seems out of place. "The least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Is this a mark of disrespect? Is it intended to keep John in his place? Or is it Jesus trying to get the people to focus on the larger picture, trying to reshape their desire for a secular king to one that recognizes that the kingdom of God is heaven-based? That secular kings like Herod and the Caesars are not relevant in this discussion?

Or is it something entirely different? A riddle, a twist of words that is designed to get the listener to think that something upside-down is going on?

Might Jesus be planting the idea that he – Jesus – is the least? He certainly talks about himself as one who serves, all that language about "the last shall be first and the first shall be last" and "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

He acts like it, washing the feet of his disciples. And if he is the least, but he is also the Son of God, wouldn't he be greater than John the Baptist? Jesus' reign doesn't depend on the usual hierarchy of king sitting above his subjects – he is king precisely because he doesn't do that.

He is king because he puts himself entirely at the service of his subjects. He is king because he puts himself below his subjects. That may not be what his audience wants to hear – they want a secular king who will drive out the hated Romans – but it's the king that they get, because it's the king that they really need.

It is the obverse side of the statement from Donald Rumsfeld, the former Secretary of Defense, who said "As you know, you go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time."

In the midst of the Iraq war, Rumsfeld thought he was stuck with an outdated military fighting a different kind of war, but he was going to do the best he could as he saw it with the military that he had.

Jesus, on the other hand, was the perfect instrument for the war that was being waged. His goal was to win the souls of humankind and bring them into a good relationship with God. Instead of being the wrong instrument for the task at hand, he was the right instrument for the task that the people didn't even realize was facing them.

He was wise about telling the people though. He knew what they were expecting, and he wasn't it. He could have taken care of those evil Romans with a mere thought or word, but that wasn't the true task. He was attending to the more important responsibility of bringing them back to God. And he was doing it not by leading an army, but by healing and teaching and bringing good news to the poor.

This gospel passage in the midst of preparation for the celebration of Jesus' birth seems not to fit: it's much more about the work than about the sweet and sentimental story of the baby in the manger. But we read it because it is good to know what we are getting into by committing ourselves to this king who is not king, this leader who serves us, this fighter who turns the other cheek.

The baby who will be king won't be born in a palace. He will not command an army of soldiers. He will be surrounded by troublemakers and troubled souls, by tax collectors and the impoverished, by women of ill repute and men who have abandoned their families to follow him. He will find himself on the outs with the powers that be. He will die.

So if you're going to fall in love with this little baby who is a newborn king, know what kind of a king you're hooking up with. Know that you will not get glory on earth. You will probably not get peace on earth, despite the Christmas carols. But you do get something. Something important, more important than backing the right candidate for king or living in a fine palace: you will get heaven. For eternity, not just during the reign of a secular king.

That's the king you will follow, if you choose. Not an ordinary king. But an extraordinary reward for following him. Watch for the baby, and watch what happens.

Amen.