

## ***“The Blessing of the Advent of the Christ”***

“I’m not a very good Christian – I’m weak – I’m just not what I should be. It’s not just that I’m a sinner – I am – but I doubt, I schwaffle and struggle to believe. At times I wonder – is Jesus, and Christianity – real?”

Such are the comments that I hear from time to time – from you – the baptized children of God. And rather than just shake my finger and scold you for saying such things – this morning, it’s much more appropriate to tell you – that you are in good company ..... with John the Baptist.

Now think about that, about who John is. He begins with a miraculous birth from “as good as dead” parents. He is set apart from birth for great things – to be the messenger who goes before the face of the Lord – to prepare the way of the coming Savior. Jesus Himself says – “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.”

It is this great one – this bold and courageous preacher of repentance – that asks the question: “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” “Jesus, are you the Christ – or should we be looking for another Savior?”

Does it shock you that John should say such things? Some can’t handle the possibility of a John the Baptist who is sincerely asking such a question – so they conclude that John is asking this question for the sake of the disciples that he sends to Jesus – so that they can hear what Jesus has to say.

No, John truly is struggling. That is how the Scriptures simply lay it out – that this great Bible hero is battling with belief and unbelief. We’re told that John has heard about the “deeds of the Christ” – about the miracles that Jesus has been doing, and His preaching and teaching.

So why wonder? Why ask the question? Because – as the text simply says – John is “in prison.”

Isn't that what usually causes your struggles – “a prison” of sorts? Your loved one dies. You battle on-going pain and suffering. Your family or marriage is on the rocks. And even though this isn't the focus of the text today – sometimes it's the very other end of the spectrum that makes such doubts arise. You're bored. Life just drags on – and you wonder if Christ, and Christianity – have any application, whether it's relevant or not – whether its real.

So, here you are. You're sitting there saying – “so answer the question!” And Jesus does. However, it may not be in the way that John the Baptist – or you – like.

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them,” Jesus says.

The disciples of John have heard and seen these things from Jesus – and they are to go back and report such things to John. And when John hears this report – he will immediately think of Isaiah 35 (our Old Testament reading for today) – which speaks of the blind, deaf, and lame.

However, “and the poor have the good news preached to them” will remind John of Isaiah 61 – which says – “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon ME, because the Lord has anointed ME to bring good news to the poor; He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound ....”

“Hey! Wait a minute Jesus! You left out that part about opening the prison to those who are bound!” The temptation for John will be to focus on what Jesus has not said – rather than on the Word He has given to John. In other words, John the Baptist will remain in jail – and as we know from the Scriptures – will soon be martyred in a most gruesome way for the faith.

The temptation is for US to focus on what Jesus has not said and done – rather than have ears to hear – and believe. The temptation in our time of struggle – is to reject Jesus as the One – the One who comes to save us.

“Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” Jesus is talking directly to John. It’s not just – “I hope I haven’t offended you” – but it’s much stronger. Blessed is the one who is not tripped up, scandalized to the point of losing salvation. John, you are blessed if you are not scandalized by my answer – by ME, by the One I am.

Earlier in St. Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus had told His disciples – “Blessed are the poor in spirit ... those who mourn,” etc. We struggle with that as much as we struggle with John being left in prison – with being left in our own prisons.

It reminds me of the Apostle Paul who pleaded with the Lord three times to take away his “thorn in the flesh” – and Jesus’ answer was, in essence, “no.” “My grace is sufficient for you,” Jesus says, “for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:9)

Blessed are YOU when the Lord does not take away your “thorn in the flesh” – or break you out of prison – or give you immediate relief from whatever ails you. You are blessed because Jesus is the One – whose grace is sufficient for you – who is your strength, even in weakness – who sets you free, even in prison – who gives you life, even in death.

Dearly beloved – blessed are you because of Jesus’ Advent for you. Advent means “the coming” – and Jesus, the Christ, has come for you at Bethlehem, so that He might do a Calvary for you – so that you are forgiven, and in Him, have everlasting life.

Blessed are you because Jesus “advents” to you through His Word and Sacraments in these days – giving you a Word just like He gave John the Baptist – to strengthen you in weakness, to give you ears to hear and believe – to trust in this Jesus.

And blessed are you that Jesus will “advent” one final time, on the Last Day – to deliver you once and for all – from your prisons, your illness, your struggles – so that you might know for certain, and experience to the full – the blessing that is already yours now, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.