

Blessed Disillusionment

“This is the entire essence of life: Who are you?” young Leo Tolstoy wrote in his diary.

Our Gospel reading presents to us a similar deeply penetrating question....asked by none other than the great John the Baptist himself.... Who are you? --- “Are you the one...?”

It is of course a question that many ask! “Are you the one...?”

Like last weekend, once again we are faced with harrowing John the Baptist—but an altogether different side of him this time...

Matthew, the Gospel writer here, tells us of an incident at the end of John’s life, when he found himself in prison, in the dungeons of the fortress of Machaerus, in the mountains east of the Dead Sea, in today’s Jordan, where I was two weeks ago.

The ruler Herod Antipas of Galilee had imprisoned him. And when John had been in prison about 7 months, with

plenty of reflective time, he thinks about all that he is hearing concerning Jesus’ life and he begins to wonder... And he sends his own disciples to Jesus to ask him “Are you the one who is to come...?”

It is truly a deeply disquieting question. And one of the most haunting questions in all the Scriptures—especially given that John the Baptist is the one asking it!

It seems almost unbelievable...for after all, John had given his whole life to preparing for Jesus’ coming

This is that wild-eyed John that we read about last Sunday—the cousin of Jesus, who knew Jesus as the Christ the moment he laid eyes on him at the Jordan River, and who saw the heavens opened and heard the voice of God when he baptized Jesus, etc...

While being intimately identified with Jesus, we find him now questioning Jesus’ very identity, even credibility.

Interestingly, we see that he actually sent his own disciples to ask Jesus this question while Jesus' disciples were gone—thereby approaching Jesus in private--not wanting others to know of his own doubts.

And in his question to Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come?”, “*the one who is to come*” was not a recognized Messianic title in Judaism—showing that John was perhaps leaving open the possibility that Jesus might not be the Messiah.

What in the world happened to John? Had he been brainwashed in prison? Had he broken down from intense interrogation, and lost his sense of reality?

And, unbeknownst to John, it will not be long before Herod's new step-daughter asks for his head on a silver platter---and some of us have seen that hauntingly graphic painting of that tragedy by the great Caravaggio, now at the National Gallery in London.

I would like to propose that he was suffering what I would call “blessed disillusionment”.

I. Last week our Gospel reading addressed the preaching of John the Baptist—and you will recall that it was essentially, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”

Now, on the surface, in today's language, that sounds like a pretty heavy and harsh message—seemingly threatening language.

This is not the message most of us would drive hours to hear 😊 (many have even left churches that sound that note!)

But what is amazing is that for some reason John's message attracted the people to it like a magnet—they came in droves—and he started a widespread movement.

-So much so, that as a result John became a household name in Palestine. He became so popular that in the book of Acts we hear of the continuance of a sect following him after his death—25 years later.

And historically, we know that his tomb, in Samaria, was a place greatly revered—with many, many pilgrims visiting it--- until the mid-300's when it was desecrated by Julian the Apostate and John's relics were scattered all over the place—from Italy to Persia to Damascus, Syria to the Wadi Natrun desert area in Egypt...just north of where we lived for ten years.

In fact, John was so highly revered that a sect called the Mandaeans (or "Followers of St. John") originated in the 1st century after his death and still survives in Iraq! (they even have bishops...but are followers of John the Baptist)

Illus—new Iraqi refugee telling me he was a "Baptist" in Detroit 😊

What was it about what John was preaching? Well, John's business was "repentance" --- which is not a word we hear much these days.

The Greek root of the word "repent" that is used here means to "turn around"—or "turn toward"

So what John was urging people to do, was to simply "turn toward God all the more"!

And in order for John to preach this with such conviction, he must have had the complete confidence that God will warmly receive everyone!

Meaning that more than anything else, he saw God as a God of *mercy and compassion*.

So he was calling people in effect to turn around and see who God really is!

And when the crowds heard “repent,” which can seem like a threat to us today---it sounded like a promise to them! They saw it as a profound message of hope—and they were attracted to what John offered them.

We tend to hear guilt, where they heard mercy! And for John, he had obviously glimpsed that mercy is at the heart of God.

Interestingly, the name “John” meant “God is gracious”

John understood this most important aspect of God’s nature—and it is critical that we first and foremost have a correct understanding of God’s character.

For as the late Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, said: “If [we] have a false idea of God, then the more religious [we] are the worse it is for [us]. . . .”

And the mercy and compassion of God are at the very center of our faith

In the Middle East, our Muslim brothers and sisters have a wonderful phrase that they frequently use, that I think we can all take advantage of. It goes like this:

“Bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim” - In the Name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate. They are actually the first lines of the Qur’an...and of every chapter (surah) in their holy book.

And they say those words all the time—before eating---or before even climbing a step ladder to change a light bulb ☺ :

“In the Name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate”—It is a beautiful idea—being reminded throughout the activities of the day of the “mercy and compassion of God”.

And this is the ultimate plot of the Advent story—that God entered our world, through Jesus, with all of its “hardships”—both sometimes personal and global---in order to embrace us—and to more easily enable us to experience God’s mercy and love.

I am reminded of that powerful verse in the Hebrew Bible, in the Book of Exodus that echoes God's mercy--speaking of the Hebrew people in Egypt: "The Lord said, ' I have seen their misery, I have heard them crying out, and I am concerned about their suffering...so I have come down to rescue them...and bring them out... ' ” (Exodus 3:7-8)

And in this sense, in thinking about the Advent and Christmas season, it is really not about giving to God—but really much more so about us receiving from God!

John the Baptist had profoundly glimpsed the mercy of God.

BUT while understanding God's nature—he actually misunderstood the way God works! He only had half the picture!

II. As John sat in prison, hearing reports of Jesus' ministry, he observed that everything was happening so differently from what he expected---and he was confused and even disillusioned and he began to seriously question Jesus and the way Jesus was choosing to work.

For Jesus' ministry was taking on an appearance totally different from what he had foreseen---what John heard about Jesus in prison bore little resemblance to the picture he had of what the Messiah should be like.

It is important to remember that John, like the other Jewish people at that time, imagined that the Messiah would come with physical and military force to overthrow the Roman occupation.

He expected the messianic kingdom to be ushered in cataclysmically, suddenly. That the Messiah would be a superhuman figure dashing into history to remake the world and vindicate the Jewish people. They all thought of national liberation.

So John had a preconceived view as to how God would work. He probably even looked forward to the day when Jesus would topple Herod from his throne, become king, and get him, his cousin, out of prison.

And now stuck in prison, he was beginning to realize that Jesus was not doing anything of the kind—and failing to match up to his expectations and preconditioned views.

Had Jesus forgotten the script? It seemed to John he was working with a different script altogether!

And Jesus very much surprises John with the answer to his question, “Are you the one who is to come?”

Instead, Jesus told John’s disciples, “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.”

It is a litany of sorts of those whom God goes out of His way to embrace—it is a list symbolically representing simply all those “in need” in whatever kind of way....

Jesus gave him a radical answer! These are words that reveal the heart of God! For he was reminding John that God is ultimately about mercy and that God’s ways will always align with that.

Jesus is in effect saying to John, “Maybe I am not doing the things you expected me to do, but I am working my way, which is not only a better way...it is a demonstration of what God is really like.”

All too often, while understanding that mercy and compassion is at God’s core, one ends up putting restraints and “limitations” on God, often due to our finite perceptions of God and of how God works.

Along the way in life, it is very easy to acquire some definite ideas about how God works and doesn’t work.

It is so easy to consciously or subconsciously put “boundaries” on God, creating a system by which God is supposed to function in--where one in effect “boxes God in”

However, God cannot be “managed” or confined or domesticated by our predetermined ideas of how God works.

Our Gospel reading is a call to having a nonrestrictive mindset, where we “unbox God,” choosing to allow God to work unrestrained in both the world and in our own lives.

I am reminded of that powerful scene in Nikos Kazantzakis’ penetrating and somewhat disturbing book, *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Kazantzakis paints a picture of Jesus and John that one cannot forget. It is sunrise. They are sitting high above the Jordan in the hollow of a rock, where they have been arguing all night long about what to do with the world.

John’s face is hard and decisive; from time to time his arms go up and down as though he were actually chopping something apart.

Jesus’ face, by contrast, is tame and hesitant. His eyes are full of compassion.

“Isn’t love enough?” he asks John. “No,” John answers angrily. “The tree is rotten. God called me and gave me the ax, which I then placed at the roots of the tree. I did my duty. Now you do yours: Take the ax and strike!”

Jesus says, “If I were fire, I would burn. If I were a woodcutter, I would strike; but I am a heart, and I love.”

The mercy of God is a dangerous force, because it can completely shatter all presuppositions about God.

And the beauty of all this is that... in our Reading, Jesus invokes a special blessing on those who realize this.

He says, “Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me”
“Blessed is the person who doesn’t try to box me in”

Our Reading today is really a story of great disillusionment—John’s. But disillusionment is not a bad thing---for it is in reality the loss of an illusion about God. Blessed disillusionment!

Disillusionment can end up giving us a fresh and accurate vision of God’s mercy.

Our Gospel reading closes with a very personal demonstration of God’s mercy and heart—which is of profound encouragement!

John the Baptist, in questioning Jesus, did what some would see as the “worst” thing he could have done---doubting Jesus’ authenticity—after all he had been through with Jesus!

Yet Jesus turned around and gave John the greatest of compliments, saying, “...among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.”

No matter how we are or what we face.... God’s mercy always takes the day—and overrules!

Advent is about not “boxing God in” as to how God comes to us and to our world anew and afresh!

In the Name of God, the Merciful and the Compassionate.

Bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim

Amen.